Cued/Uncued Oral Narrative Tasks in Foreign Language Fluency

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is very often seen in the EFL classroom that differences in situational requirements produce variability in the learner's performance. The situational requirements include many factors, such as setting, subject matter, activity type, participants' sex, and age. Tarone (1985) calls them external situational factors and defines the interrelationship between these factors and the learner's internal processing capabilities as "task."

Effects of task have been discussed in the variability of interlanguage production or in a task-based approach to pedagogy (Brown and Yule, 1983; Crookes and Gass, 1993; Ellis, 1987; Long and Crookes, 1992; Robinson, 1995; Tarone, 1981, 1985, 1988, 1989). Brown and Yule (1983) relate the task effect in the study of "communicative stress" and found that a speaker will do best under conditions of least communicative stress.

Teaching oral aspects of communication has been increasingly recognized as an important dimension in EFL pedagogy. It can be said that one of the goals for language learners is to produce fluent speech, which is supposed to be something that students should be able to do by the final stage of language acquisition. In an EFL situation like Japan, where English is taught by mainly focusing on grammatical rules rather than communicative aspects such as speaking, the assessment and development of oral proficiency, often referred to as fluency, are a high priority. However, there is little empirical evidence regarding how to assess and develop fluency for lower level learners.

As for the definition of fluency, many researchers refer to Fillmore's (1979) four kinds of ability necessary for L1 speakers: (1) to fill time with talk, (2) to talk in coherent, reasoned and semantically dense sentences, (3) to have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts, and finally (4) to be creative and imaginative in language use. On the other hand, in the case of L2 learners, fluency is often seen from the listener's point of view such as "an impression on the listener's part" (Lennon, 1990) or "listener's attention on speaker's message rather than on production process" (Yashima and Viswat, 1997). In this paper I regard fluency as "a speaker's ability to fill time with talk," which is cited as the first ability for L1 fluency mentioned above. "To fill time with talk" roughly means here "to produce many more words with fewer pauses." I think it is the most basic requirement for L2 fluency, especially when learners are in lower level like this study. Oral fluency has been examined both in monologue (narrative) and dialogue engaged in face-to-face interaction. Face-to-face interaction involves many factors such as backchanneling, input level of an interlocutor and social relationships between a speaker and a listener. However, this study focuses on fluency in narrative alone, because in EFL situations the narrative task has been effectively and efficiently employed to assess learners' oral proficiency as seen in Standard Test of English Proficiency (STEP). The narrative task used so far is either a cued narrative which requires speakers to talk in a
closed context like picture description, or an uncued narrative which allows speakers to talk on a certain topic in an open context.

This study attempts to investigate the interlanguage variability in task differences, cued or uncued, and the relationship between the oral development of one type of task and that of the other type of task.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot of studies have been made on components to assess oral proficiency of one time or on longitudinal development of L2 speaking ability for a certain time period. Fluency motivates quantitative studies such as speech rate and the number of pauses (Arvart and Nation, 1993; Kamimoto and Kawauchi, 1995; Lennon, 1989, 1990; Riggenback, 1991) and also qualitative studies such as discourse markers and communicative strategies during oral production (Bialystok, 1983; Ejzenberg, 1992; Kawauchi and Kamimoto, 1997; Olynik, d'Anglejan, & Sankoff, 1990; Tarone, 1977, 1981; Yashima, Yamamoto, & Viswat, 1994). Major characteristics of the previous studies can be divided into three points: task difficulty, perceptual differences for tasks, and development of oral fluency.

Task difficulty in L2 fluency relates to the subject matter of the topic, its complexity and familiarity, learner's stage of interlanguage development, and learner factors such as motivation. The topic of personal interest might encourage a better performance, owing to motivation and confidence such as seen in the interview about the homestay (Yashima, Yamamoto, and Viswat, 1994; Yashima and Viswat, 1997) and a study trip abroad (Lennon, 1990). On the other hand, the task requiring accurate and precise use of a target language will impose a greater cognitive load.

Robinson (1995), using a picture description task, assumed that the task of requiring past tense to describe the event of "There-and-Then" would be more attention-demanding than the task requiring present tense like a "Here-and-Now" situation. His results indicated that there were no significant differences between the two situations in terms of propositional complexity, syntactic complexity, and the number of pauses. However, the "There-and-Then" condition elicited greater accuracy in terms of target-like use of articles and a greater use of content words called lexical words than the "Here-and-Now" condition. He concluded that these differences were due to differences in the cognitive load imposed by the tasks, and suggested that the "There-and-Then" tasks elicit a different kind of fluency, or lexical fluency, than that characterized by pausing phenomena.

Task conditions also influence the speaker's own perceptions about the task. To the best of the author's knowledge, there is only one study to deal with this question. Ejzenberg (1992) examined four different kinds of tasks to see the effects of oral tasks on speech production and discourse variability. The four tasks are:

1. guided role-play as a cued dialogue
2. unguided role-play as an uncued dialogue
3. picture-based story as a cued monologue
4. personal story as an uncued monologue
The interesting findings are shown in the speakers' feedback about the task difficulty, task efficacy for testing oral proficiency and task efficacy for testing fluency. Forty-six subjects responded in a questionnaire and interview after the tests. The results of the questionnaire indicated that there were no significant differences in task difficulty among these four tasks. However, the subjects perceived the cued monologue and uncued dialogue significantly different in their efficacy as task to oral proficiency and fluency. On the other hand, in the interview the same subjects responded that the cued condition provided easier context than the uncued condition. They said that the uncued monologue was the most effective task to measure their oral proficiency and fluency even though they considered it the least favorite task. Impressionistic evaluation by native speakers, however, indicated that the cued and the uncued monologues were practically identical.

Comparison of fluency between before and after a certain time period gives us some insights for facilitating factors which develop speaking ability of learners. Lam (1994) reports on a longitudinal study to investigate three related aspects of oral fluency: fluency improvement, correlation between subjective judgments and objective counts, and variation of fluency in different speech interactions. As quantitative variables, Lam used speech rate reflected with the number of "pruned" words per minute, the number of filled pauses per T-unit and the percent of T-units followed by pause as examined in Lennon (1990). Tracking fluency progress before and after a 20-week refresher course, she found no improvement in the verbal fluency in relation to the impressionistic ratings over time. However, the subjective impression of fluency was closely associated with speech rate but not with the counts of filled pauses such as "oh" and "well" or the positioning of pauses. All the 15 subjects were teachers of secondary schools in Hong Kong and considered advanced speakers. However, when it comes to lower level speakers, the use of filled pauses seems to facilitate oral production.

Yashima, Yamamoto, and Viswat (1994) dealt with eight high school students who spent one year with an American family. Informal interviews for 10 to 15 minutes were used before and after the one year study experience. One of the main findings was the improvement of the average speech rate and the reduction of unfilled pauses and repetitions. The major characteristics in the discourse level were the subjects' frequent uses of discourse markers such as "oh," "well," "and," "but," "or," "so," "because," "now," "then," "I mean," and "y'know." However, no significant improvement was found in the grammatical correctness and the vocabulary level. It is worthy of notice that these markers have something to do with L2 fluency in the case of lower level speakers.

Discourse markers cited above are categorized as filled pauses ("oh," "well") and connectives ("and," "but," "or," "so," "because"). Also, expressions like "I mean" and "y'know" can be called patterns and routines, respectively (Krashen and Scarcella, 1978). The important function of these set-phrases has been emphasized by many studies (Coulmas, 1981; Dörnyei, 1995; Krashen and Scarcella, 1978; Pawley and Syder, 1983). These expressions play effective roles in developing interlanguage and facilitating native-like production.

Similar findings are shown in Ejzenberg (1992). She focused on the relationship
between connectives, or what she calls integration strategies, and fluency levels. The speech offered solid evidence of the connection between chaining integration strategy (e.g. "and," "but," "or") and increased fluency in the speaker's discourse. However, grammatical integration, such as subordinate conjunction strategy (e.g. "when," "after") relates to the disfluency episodes both in the higher and lower speakers.

Last but not least is silent, or unfilled, pauses: their positioning, frequency and length. Silent pauses imply various kinds of functions at the time of speaking in a target language but do not give us any "direct window" of these functions to see what processes are exactly going on. Lennon (1990) explains, citing a study by Shin (1989), that the pause positioning is more crucial than the amount of pauses in the perception of fluency. Pauses before a sentence and clause are termed as juncture pauses, whereas, pauses occurred within syntactic units are called hesitation pauses. He says that since juncture pauses occur at major syntactic boundaries, they do not seem to disturb the comprehension of the speech. However, hesitation pauses within syntactic clauses are likely to be perceived longer and to cause listeners to feel more sustained than juncture pauses.

To summarize these studies, the rate of speech, syntactic complexity and accuracy, and the use of pauses, connectives and routines/patterns can be strong indicators to assess L2 fluency.

In light of the previous findings, this study poses the following three questions:
(1) When assessing oral fluency of narratives, how does the cuing affect rate of speech, syntactic complexity, and impressionistic evaluation of fluency?
(2) How does regular speaking practice of one type of task (uncued) for a certain period of time enhance oral fluency of the other type of task (cued)?
(3) How does the use of pauses, connectives, and routines/patterns relate to cuing difference in the narrative task?

3. METHOD
3.1 Subjects
Fifteen subjects participated in the study, but 11 of them completed all the necessary requirements. All 11 subjects were non-English major first year college students. The average length of studying English was 6.4 years. According to the results of the Secondary Level English Proficiency Test (SLEP) which includes reading and listening sections, their equivalent mean TOEFL scores were 399.

3.2 Materials
The subjects were given two different tasks: an uncued narrative task reflected in personal storytelling (story) and a cued narrative reflected in picture description (picture). The first task, the story, is a kind of open task which does not require any correctness or conclusions. In an attempt to control for task difficulty the subjects were asked to make a short speech about the most memorable event in the past.

The second task, the picture, consisted of four series of pictures with two forms; Form A was a story of cooking, and Form B was that of drinking. In both forms there
was an introductory sentence given to start the explanations of the picture. The two forms, which were chosen from the pre-first level of STEP, were considered identical in difficulty level.

3.3 Procedure

The subjects’ oral productions of both the story and the picture were tape-recorded in the modified 4/3/2 technique (Maurice, 1983). This technique was designed to help intermediate and advanced students improve their abilities to speak more fluently in a target language. The basic idea is to have each student speak on one topic three times to three different partners. The length of each speech changes with each partner. First, it’s four, then three, and finally two minutes. The reasoning behind the technique consists of three elements: 1) repeating the same topic three times, 2) speaking to different partners, and 3) shrinking time frames. These three elements also relate to reducing communicative stress and create more authentic situations than simple repetition. This technique is considered especially effective for speakers like our students who have very few opportunities to speak with native speakers. However, the period of 4/3/2 time frame is too long for our subjects, so the length was reduced to 2/1.5/1 minutes. The maximum two minutes was chosen because the pre-first level of STEP uses a 2-minute-speech in the test administration.

The subjects performed both story and picture tasks. In both tasks they were divided into two groups (Group 1 and 2). The first time Group 1 was the speaking group and Group 2 was the listening group. In the picture task Group 1 was given Form A, and they described the pictures while the subjects in Group 2 listened. After a set interval Group 2 was given Form B and became the speaking group and Group 1 listened. In the story task each subject of Group 1 told their story while Group 2 listened. After a set interval the same procedure was repeated. Before the speech, one-minute planning time was provided in both of the tasks. The listeners were not allowed to take notes or ask questions while listening. To avoid a practice effect, Group 1 was given the story task, and Group 2 the picture task in the first week, and one week later the groups exchanged their tasks.

After speaking, the subjects were asked to transcribe the tape and then to write out the ideas they wanted to express at the time they were speaking. They were allowed to resort to a dictionary when they were writing.

All the transcriptions of these deliveries were later checked by the author. Four native speakers of English were asked to listen to the third delivery and to rate their oral proficiency impressionistically. They evaluated the individual speech based on the four categories; 1) pronunciation 2) grammar, 3) vocabulary and 4) fluency with the scale ranging from 1 to 7. These categories were adapted from the FSI oral proficiency scale. On an evaluation form provided, the two extremes were given, indicating “1” being “very poor” and “7” “very good.” No other criteria, such as indication or a hint as “7” being equal to native speakers’ performance level, were provided. This unstructured scoring criteria were used because it was considered that the final evaluation of perceived fluency
would more closely resemble the impression given by an untrained native speaker.

In order to see the longitudinal development of oral fluency, all the subjects were then assigned a speaking activity using the 2/1.5/1 technique once a week for 10 weeks. No extra instruction was provided during the session. In this ten week session the subjects were assigned this activity as a warm up in a regular English class based on reading. They were asked to speak on personal and familiar topics such as "weekends," "hobbies" and "college life" in the narrative form. As a post-test, the same picture description formats were used to examine the development of their fluency. In other words, the subjects had the ten-week session of the uncued story task, and were later tested on the cued picture task.

The data was analyzed on the basis of speech rate, syntactic complexity, native speakers' ratings and possible function of features such as pauses and connectives.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 A cued task vs. an uncued task

Table 1 shows speech rate reflected with the average number of words per minute (WPM), syntactic complexity reflected with the average number of words per T-unit (WTU) and native speakers' ratings (NS) for the third delivery of the uncued story and the cued picture tasks. As for WPM, a repeated word was counted as one word, and a contraction such as "I'm" and "aren't" was counted as two words. WTU was used to indicate the degree of complexity, that is, how many words are used within a single terminal unit. As for NS, average total scores for the four categories (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency) were used; the maximum score for each task was 28 (7 scales x 4 categories). The average number of words in the written form (Writing) is also given.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>WPM</th>
<th>WTU</th>
<th>NS</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-value</td>
<td>3.78**</td>
<td>2.35*</td>
<td>2.47*</td>
<td>3.07**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The uncued story task indicated higher scores for all the items examined. The differences between them are all statistically significant. The cued task, the picture, did not bring out better performance. The results of writing in each task indicated that the subjects produced significantly more words in the uncued story than in the cued picture. This suggests that the subjects had more to say when talking about themselves than they did when describing the picture.

The fact that the story produced more words than the picture might have affected NSs' evaluations. In order to see how the speech rate relates to the native speakers'
impressionistic ratings, correlations between WPM in the third delivery and the NS ratings are calculated for the story and the picture. The results of the Pearson correlations and Spearman Rank order correlations are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Spearman Rank Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>0.79**</td>
<td>0.69*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture</td>
<td>0.49ns</td>
<td>0.47ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01   *p<.05   ns: not significant

The Pearson correlations in the uncued story showed a high relationship between the speech rate and NS evaluation. The Spearman rank order correlation is also significantly high. This means that the subjects who produced more words tended to obtain higher scores from native speakers. Also, those who were ranked higher in speech rate were also ranked higher in NS ratings.

However, the cued picture didn't display strong correlation, nor was it significantly high in the rank order correlation. This suggests that the speech rate functions as a reliable indicator to assess the oral production for an uncued task like storytelling. However, the speech rate might not be adequate for the assessment of the oral production in the cued task like a picture description.

Interrater reliability estimates based on the pairwise correlations among four raters were 0.75 for the story and 0.69 for the picture. The low reliabilities can be expected, considering that no explicit criteria were provided to the raters. In this unstructured rating situation, the reliability for the story is fairly respectable. This finding partially substantiated the result that the story task can be used as a reliable indicator to assess oral production.

Cross comparison of the NS evaluations between the uncued story and the cued picture indicated that there was no significant Pearson correlation (r=0.25ns) nor Spearman rank order correlation (r=0.15ns). The lack of correlations suggests that those who obtained higher ratings in the story are not necessarily good at describing the picture. These results certainly show that the subjects displayed different levels of oral fluency according to the cuing difference.

The cued picture, which is rather a closed context task, seemed to impose an extra burden on the subjects to stick to the content and speak about it, limiting communication strategies such as topic avoidance and replacement. The uncued story task was also restricted in a sense that the subjects were asked to speak about the past event using the past tense which should demand more cognitive load than using the present tense. In spite of this, the story task tended to give the subjects more freedom to speak and use any strategy to keep talking.
4.2 Speaking practice

In order to see the effect of the 10 week speaking practice of the uncued task on the cued task, I compared effects before and after the speaking session in terms of speech rate, syntactic complexity, native speakers' ratings and written forms. Results of the pre-test of the picture (pre-picture) and the post-test of it (post-picture) in the third delivery are shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Average Scores of Pre- and Post-picture Tasks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WPM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-picture 40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-picture 54.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-value 5.91**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01 ns: not significant

There is a significant improvement in the rate of speech. However, no significant differences are found in the degree of syntactic complexity, NS ratings, or writings. These results imply that the subjects still had a hard time in describing the picture even after the 10 week session. However, a high Pearson's correlation of the NS ratings was found between the story and the post-picture (r=0.71**), suggesting that the picture description after the session was rated similarly as the storytelling. It implies that the 10 week session enabled the learners to perform as they did in the story task. In this sense, the speaking practice of the story may have indirectly contributed to the improvement of the picture description. In fact, no correlation was found between the story and the pre-picture (r=0.25ns) when the practice session had not started yet.

Although there was an improvement between the pre-picture and the post-picture in terms of the speech rate, the story task still surpassed the post-picture description. The difference between the story and the post-picture was significant in terms of syntactic complexity (t=2.56**) and NS ratings (t=2.28*). It is fair to say that cueing difference is more crucial than developmental improvement.

4.3 Pauses

Pauses play a crucial role in assessing the degree of fluency; the more frequently speakers stop, the more difficult it is for the listeners to follow. In order to see the positioning and frequency of pauses, I examined all the words after the pauses occurred. By doing so, I could partly predict what causes the speaker to hesitate and stop. Robinson (1995) considered a pause of two seconds as significant but in this study, I took three seconds as a cut-off point, because the proficiency level of the subjects was rather low, and this length clearly disturbs the fluency of speech. Fillers such as meaningless "uum" and "err" were included as pauses. Some subjects finished their speech before the time limit, but the remaining time was not counted as a pause.

Pauses were categorized into the following five types based on syntactic functions of
words uttered after the pause. A dot in the transcription means a second. Sn stands for a subject number. S after the slash means the story, P1 the pre-picture and P2 the post-picture description.

Type 1: Prior to sentential subject nouns
S1/P1: but they ... but ... they ... enjoyed
S2/P1: She was in the kitchen ... She ... She was

Type 2: Prior to conjunctions
S4/P1: They forgot the time....But the time to go home came
S10/P2: At the time, the telephone rang ... After a man went home

Type 3: Prior to verbs (including infinitive verbs)
S6/P1: When she was cooking...the chime ....called her.
S1/S: I . I tried to ... tell ... tell Americans

Type 4: Prior to/between adverbial phrases
S10/S: I went to ... Shingu Beach with .... my friend

Type 5: Others
S1/P2: Mr .... Tanaka notices his wallet was gone
S7/S: last Saturday and Sunday...sum...the game...(stop)

Table 4 indicates the frequency counts of pauses in the story, pre-picture, and post-picture tasks. For reference, the frequency of the first delivery (D1) to the second delivery (D2) are also shown as well as the third delivery (D3).

Table 4. Frequency of Pauses in Story, Pre- and Post-picture Tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Pre-picture</th>
<th>Post-picture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D1</td>
<td>D2</td>
<td>D3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In all the tests, a large amount of pauses occurred on Type 1 and 2 which are called juncture pauses (Lennon, 1990). These pauses seem to occur when the subjects have difficulty finding the right words to start with for the selected pattern. Also, after the speakers combined the preceding utterance with connectives, they seemed to struggle again for a global form of sentence which was not easily accessible to the speakers. The words after the pauses were sometimes repeated, showing the speaker tried to reorganize or expand what he/she intended to say. In order to see if the uses of juncture pauses differ in the cuing, chi-square analysis was performed. Viewing the story as the expected totals and the pre- and post-pictures as the observed, no significant differences.
were found in the three deliveries between the story and the pre-picture (DF=2, \( \chi^2 = 4.26 \text{ns} \)) or between the story and post-picture (DF=2, \( \chi^2 = 1.89 \text{ns} \)).

Type 3 to 5 are categorized into the hesitation pause. Since hesitation pauses occur within syntactic clauses, they are likely to be perceived longer and considered to be a disfluency indicator. The frequency in Type 3, prior to verbs, showed the largest counts. The speakers seemed to stop to find the verb even after they found an appropriate word for the subject of the sentence. Again, chi-square analysis showed no significant differences in the use of hesitation pauses between the story and the pre-picture (DF=2, \( \chi^2 = 4.54 \text{ns} \)) or between the story and the post-picture (DF=2, \( \chi^2 = 3.35 \text{ns} \)), when the story was used as the expected totals.

Although the similar amount of occurrence was found, the use of individual subjects varied; 0 to 6 for the story, 0 to 5 for the pre-picture, and 0 to 9 for the post-picture in the case of the third delivery. However, there were high correlations between the story and the pre-picture (r=0.61), between the story and the post-picture (r=0.61), and between the pre- and post-pictures (r=0.86). These findings indicate that pauses were employed in a similar manner although the cuing was different.

The dramatic decrease of pauses from D1 to D3 is due to the repetition technique employed in this study. The large number in the first delivery indicates that the speakers employed a lot of stopping and pausing during the whole time frame given to them, looking for appropriate words and/or structure for their message. However, by repeating the same talk, the subjects could establish a sequence of the subject and the predicate without making any hesitation.

### 4.5 Connectives and patterns/routines

The qualitative aspects of content and form are influenced by the use of connectives and expressions like patterns/routines discussed earlier. The roles of connectives are to combine utterances and to demonstrate that the speakers are still engaged in the speech. Table 5 shows the total counts of connectives used in the three tests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Frequency of Connectives in Story, Pre- and Post-picture Tasks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-picture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was a significant difference between the story and the pre-picture (DF=2, \( \chi^2 = 7.60^* \)) in connectives used in each delivery. Fewer connectives were found in the pre-picture. However, the number of connectives increased in the post-picture to the level of the story, which is also considered to be an effect of the practice session.

All the subjects used connectives. As for the third delivery, the average counts used by each subject ranged from 5.3 to 1.3. The type of connectives, however, covers rather a small range; the majority of the markers used were “and” “so” “then/and then” and
"but." Looking at the types in each test, we found there was a great difference in the use of "then/and then" between the uncued story and cued pictures. This might be due to the discourse differences of the tasks; the picture description requires students to build a story according to a set sequence. This seems to require speakers to use "then/and then" as the connectives, while the personal story frequently might not include sequential events.

No explicit routines/patterns were found. However, four subjects in the story, six subjects in the pre-picture, and five subjects in the post-picture used a subordinate clause starting with "when I": "when I was high school student," "When they left there," "When Mr. Tanaka pay a money," etc. This clause seems to be one of the preferred patterns and facilitated a longer sequence, but the instances are very limited to make any definitive conclusions.

5. CONCLUSION

Cuing in the narrative task did affect the oral fluency for lower level EFL learners. Provision of cuing resulted in lower speech rate, less syntactic complexity, and lower evaluation by native speakers. Cuing seems to impose an extra burden, or cognitive load, about how to say it, although what to say is already provided. On the other hand, in the uncued story task, the subjects tended to speak more words with longer sequences, which were reflected in higher evaluations by native speakers. The speech rate functions as an indicator for assessing impressionistic oral fluency of the uncued task like storytelling, but not for the cued task like picture description. However, results of pauses showed cuing made no difference; lower learners used juncture and hesitation pauses in the similar manner whether it was a cued or uncued task.

A higher correlation of the NS ratings between the uncued story and the cued post-picture implies that the 10 week session was effective in the sense that this enabled the learners to perform the picture description as they did the storytelling in the end. More use of connectives in the post-picture also supported this. However, the uncued story task surpassed both of the cued picture tasks. Although the subjects in the story task were expected to use the past tense which imposed more cognitive load than the present tense, they could resort to any topics that they could manage. This brings to mind the old slogan, "Language learners should say what they can and not what they want to" (Dörnyei, 1995). In other words, the uncued story task seems to move the learners to employ various communication strategies such as topic avoidance, abandonment and replacement at the time of difficulty. In contrast, the cued picture tended to force the speakers to stick to the content of the picture and consequently lessened the chances of utilizing communication strategies. Moreover, their limited vocabulary made it hard to elaborate and enlarge the content depicted in the picture.

The speaking practice session can be more effective if we include explicit and systematic teaching of communication strategies and fillers to foster speaking. All the subjects had in our study was encouragement to keep talking in the use of Maurice’s repetition technique. We did not provide students with any explicit teaching, leaving their own
awareness of communication strategies in their hands. To foster L2 fluency defined as "fill time with talk," teaching communication strategies by employing routines/patterns and fillers will be very beneficial for EFL learners whose exposure to L2 input and output is exclusively limited to classrooms. Many studies have begun to advocate this point (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988; Cook, 1994; Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1994; Dörnyei, 1995). Dörnyei (1995) emphasizes that explicit teaching of stalling or time-gaining strategies is worthwhile to fill pauses and to gain time to think, saying that even topic avoidance strategy is effective in the sense that it provides the learners with a sense of security in the target language.

The task difference in oral production might raise a problem on content validity; how well a chosen test represents the subject matter content or behaviors to be tested. It would be better to specify what aspects of oral production are to be tested; is it a narrative skill of one's own experience or a narrative skill for describing specified things to convey their meaning? Also from the pedagogical point of view, the appropriate qualitative and quantitative variables to be investigated depend on the aims and content of a course or program, so the course has to be quite specific as to what sort of fluency it aims to achieve.

This study has a number of limitations. First, this was a small-scale study with only 11 subjects. Subjects at higher level of EFL learners may display different interlanguage variability and development in oral fluency. I have neither examined the effect of the cued task on the uncued task, nor have I investigated other qualitative aspects which constitute oral fluency such as the number of idea units, grammatical accuracy and changes, and topic organization. For the future study, to investigate these aspects of fluency will surely contribute to the research on task differences and task-based teaching.

Note
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REFERENCES


