# STUDENT FLUENCY AND TEACHER AUTHORITY: A RESPONSE TO PRASETIANTO

James Hunter
Gonzaga University
hunter@gonzaga.edu

## Abstract

In an early issue of *Journey*, Prasetianto (2019) argues that the best way to promote oral fluency in the Indonesian context is through information gap activities, and that small-group discussion activities are not appropriate. This article addresses misunderstandings in this position and clarifies why true communicative competence cannot be developed in controlled activities like information gaps. It discusses the role of accuracy in communicative competence, particularly in relation to emerging varieties of English, and notes the reluctance of some teachers to remove themselves from the center of the classroom and allow students to engage in authentic discussion, which is essential for the development of true fluency. Finally, it presents research indicating that students overwhelmingly value the opportunity to engage in authentic conversation with each other and the ability to see and correct their mistakes. Through this response to a critique of a student-led activity, I hope to demonstrate that a more learner-centered approach to oral communication and corrective feedback is possible, effective, and enthusiastically welcomed by our students.

**Keywords:** fluency, accuracy, communicative competence, corrective feedback

## Introduction

In the second issue of *Journey*, Mushoffan Prasetianto presents a compelling argument for the development of oral fluency ("Information Gap: Speak Fluently Is Better In EFL Context", Prasetianto, 2019) as a means to develop communicative competence, and offers a critique of an approach I describe in *'Small Talk': developing fluency, accuracy, and complexity in speaking* (Hunter, 2012) about a student-led, small group conversation activity designed to promote fluency, accuracy, and complexity in learners' oral communication. In this article, I address some areas in which I believe Prasetianto has misinterpreted my article and clarify terminological and theoretical constructs, particularly the question of accuracy and how it relates to overall communicative competence. I also address the issues of access to and use of English in the EFL context, which Prasetianto puts forward as the chief reasons why activities like Small Talk are not appropriate in the Indonesian teaching context, and I suggest ways in which students' communicative competence can be developed while allowing greater learner-centered, individual agency and choice than information-gap activities typically allow. Finally, I present a summary of survey research conducted at a women's college in the UAE, to allow readers to hear from students how Small Talk translates to comparable EFL contexts. My purpose here is to demonstrate that a more learner-centered approach to oral

communication and corrective feedback is possible, effective, and enthusiastically welcomed by our students.

**Fluency**

Prasetianto's principal misunderstanding is that Small Talk is mainly concerned with developing *accuracy* ("'Small talk'" technique focused more on accuracy", p. 41; "Hunter believes that accuracy is more important than fluency and complexity in speaking", p. 41), and his chief argument seems to be that because "there are new Englishes in the world…Thus, there is no acceptable standard English" (p. 42). He seems to be saying that it is not important for students to be accurate because there is no single standard and because meaning is paramount. Taking these points in order, I'm unsure as to why Prasetianto concludes that Small Talk focuses primarily on accuracy. Throughout my article I emphasize the need for students to:

- use their communicative ability in conversation (p. 32)

- get their point across (p. 33)
- practice… speech acts (p. 33)
- make the most of the language they have at their command (p. 34)

All of these are meaning-focused and fluency-focused; in fact, one of the key features of Small Talk is that it removes the teacher from the conversation and allows the students to negotiate meaning for themselves. I quote Willis (1992, 180) on this point: "in the absence of the teacher, [students'] interaction becomes far richer." What this means is that without the teacher's constant presence – whether as linguistic support or watchdog – students have to collaboratively negotiate meaning, and in doing so they start to develop "natural language use, whether or not it results in native-

speaker-like language comprehension or production" (Brumfit, 1984, 56). In other words, it is the very act of working to produce language, especially when it cannot be completely planned (as happens in authentic conversations), that leads to the development of fluency.

**Native-Speaker Norms and World Englishes**

I wholeheartedly agree that that inner-circle norms (Kachru, 1992) should not be used as standards in other contexts, but that is not the same as saying that there are *no standards or norms at all*. For instance, in a recent article Endarto (2020, 104-105) gives several examples of emerging Indonesian English: *discuss about*, *explain about*, and the use of *staff* as a countable noun. The very fact that these forms exist (especially in print) is evidence of an emerging standard of Indonesian English in which, for example, *staff* is a countable noun. If I were teaching in Indonesia, I would not correct my students if they said: *I like the staffs at this school.* But I would correct them if they said: *I liking staffs at school this*, and I suspect most Indonesian English teachers would, too. Note that this is not because I cannot clearly understand the intended meaning; it is because there is such a thing as (Indonesian) English, and *at school this* does not conform to it, and neither does *I liking*.

But how do students in Indonesia know how to express themselves in English, especially if, as Prasetianto claims, "in Indonesia, the natural environment does not support students to get rich language input, the students only get language input in the classroom" (p. 42)? Access to English is a complex and contentious socio-economic question and space does not permit discussion here, but I would note that in 2021, over 70% of Indonesians own smartphones, with an internet penetration rate of 73.7%,

according to The Jakarta Post (Eloksari, 2020). So, while most students may not hear or use English in daily communication, there are certainly ways to increase their exposure to rich language input, both in and out of the classroom, and considerable research has been conducted in the last ten years around the effectiveness of Mobile-assisted Language Learning (For a recent survey, see Seraj et al., 2021). One variation on Small Talk introduced by a colleague at my institution was to have the Small Talk leader every week choose a short Ted Talk by a non-inner-circle speaker of English (e.g. https://www.ted.com/talks/william_kam kwamba_how_i_harnessed_the_wind#t-111498) for the class to watch as background for the discussions, and to formulate personalized, applied discussion questions based on it such as: *Tell us about a creative way you have solved a problem in the past*.

**Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency**

When students discuss questions like this, they can (and, we hope, will) prepare by looking up vocabulary, deciding how to shape their narrative, rehearsing chunks of language, and so on. Each student's narrative is different, of course, and peers therefore have authentic motivation to listen to each other and understand – there is an authentic *information gap*, in other words. When trying to understand each other's stories, peers often ask questions, which the speaker cannot prepare for. That is precisely the kind of negotiation of meaning and language that we want, in order to help our students to develop confidence, fluency, and complexity. Fluency develops when students "use language in real time, to emphasize meanings, possibly drawing on more lexicalized systems", according to Skehan and Foster (1999, 96-7). Complexity develops when students

notice that they don't know how to express particular meanings and "may also involve a greater willingness to take risks, and use fewer controlled language subsystems" (Skehan and Foster, 1999, 96-7). Small Talk, then, is a way to maximize learning opportunities and to facilitate negotiated interaction (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) so that students feel able to take risks.

However, language learners want to know when they are not communicating meaning successfully, and that is the point: teachers need to find a *balance* between fostering communicative fluency so that our students can produce language, and guiding student output towards accuracy. That is why, in the Small Talk approach, the teacher does not interrupt conversations to provide corrective feedback (CF) in the form of prompts, recasts, clarification requests, etc. (Lyster and Ranta, 1997). Instead, delayed CF is provided in the form of worksheets and audio recordings so that students can practice accurate (and often more complex) versions of what they want to say. (Since 2016, CF has been provided via a free online platform, www.comsem.net, which allows students to access these worksheets on mobile devices. The platform also uses speech-to-text technology to allow students to practice the pronunciation of those items, which helps to address an issue highlighted in Utomo (2021), namely the "lack of oral practice in pronunciation and lack of exposures which makes them unable to imitate the correct sounds" (p. 33). (See Hunter (2021) for an overview.)

**The Role of the Teacher**

An aspect of the Small Talk approach that seems to particularly trouble Prasetianto is what the teacher is doing while these small group conversations are going on: "In the classroom, the teacher had no role. The

teacher let the students speak. The teacher only monitored the students" (p. 42). He perhaps (mistakenly) assumes that Small Talk is the *only* activity that happens in our oral communication classes, which is certainly not the case. Furthermore, it takes planning and time to set up Small Talk, that is, training students to be able to step into the role of leader, to listen actively to each other, to be able to "talk around" words they don't know, to summarize their conversations effectively, and so on – all of which are examples of communicative competence (strategic, discourse, actional, sociocultural, and of course linguistic). It also – crucially – requires a willingness on the part of the teacher to take a back seat *while* the students are doing it; to relinquish control, for just 20 minutes, so that students can see how well they can do it. This, I think, is what many teachers struggle with (See Khasbani, 2018 for recent research on this issue in the Indonesian context.). We teachers think we must be in the middle, the central figure, the authority, in control. And if we aren't actively doing that, we "have no role".

But of course, even in the "back seat", we *do* have a role: paying close attention to how our students are using language. Prasetianto knows this, since he cites the relevant portion: "teacher should discover what learners actually wanted to say and then teach them how to say it in the target language", p. 41 (p. 31 in original), but for some reason he interprets this as meaning "teach them how to pronounce the words". Pronunciation *is* a component of accuracy, to be sure, but there is much more involved in helping learners discover how to say what they want to say. Returning to our earlier example, if you, gentle reader, heard one of your students saying: *I liking staffs at school this*, how would you teach them how to say it? Would you interrupt to give a grammar lesson on the present simple and word order in noun phrases? Would you do choral drilling on the correct form? And how would you do this without frustrating, embarrassing, and demotivating your students?

In the Small Talk approach, this kind of CF is done after the conversations, by simply showing students the original error and giving them an audio reformulation. These materials can be studied out of class and can even be used in class for form-focused activities – even, perhaps, as an information gap! That way, students develop both accuracy and new language (complexity) that is completely relevant to them, since it encodes the ideas they themselves are trying to communicate.

**Class size and EFL context**

Like many communicative methodologies, Small Talk cannot be presumed to be appropriate in every context. Prasetianto points out that his students are "reluctant to speak because of shyness" and that "In Indonesia context, a teacher often has a large class. It is impossible for a teacher to give feedback to each student." The first point is irrelevant: if students can speak during information gap activities, they can also speak in small groups of their peers. The second and third points are very important, and I agree that it would be challenging to do an activity like Small Talk with 60 or more students; it is challenging to do *any* communicative activities with very large classes. (I recommend, however, Duane Kindt's excellent "Students' Own Conversation Cards" (http://www.profkindt.com/site/soccs.html), especially for beginner learners and very large classes. That activity still allows for considerable individual student agency and choice but is logistically simpler to implement.) On the third point, I completely disagree, first because it is

not necessary to give feedback to every student after every session, and my 2012 article addresses this question specifically; second, in many EFL contexts, students tend to make similar errors. In those contexts, CF can be given anonymously on the worksheets – but students have reported to me and to many colleagues that they *like* seeing their names on worksheets. This is a decision to be made in consultation with your students, who will certainly have opinions!

**Student attitudes to Small Talk**

About ten years ago, I had the good fortune to teach for a year at a women's college in the UAE, and during that year we implemented Small Talk with 14 sections of the Foundations Program oral communication course. At the end of the 20-week semester, I surveyed the students using an online survey platform so that they could respond anonymously. Out of 240 students, 128 (53%) responded to the survey, which consisted of thirteen Likert-style questions and three yes/no questions. Every question had a comment box for students to write further explanations if they chose to. One of the most useful questions in this type of survey is, *Do you think students in (this course) next year should do (this activity)?* because it asks respondents to think about the benefit to their fellow students rather than just themselves. In

this case, the response was overwhelming: of the 121 students who answered this question, 108 (89.3%) response "Yes" and 13 (10.7%) "No". Their comments for this item (reported verbatim here) included:

- help them to enhance the Language and Vocabulary, confidant and have positive attitude.
- because it is really helpful to improve our language
- It is nice to have a discussion with your classmates
- Because it can help students to enteract easily with each other and talk fluently in front of each other and the teacher without being afraid of mistakes.

Note especially that in addition to the value of improving their language, these comments underscore several of the positive aspects of Small Talk which I hope I have highlighted in this article: the emphasis on fluency, the value of peer interaction, and the reduction of fear of making mistakes. Responses to five of the Likert scale items are shown in Table 1. These responses are again overwhelmingly positive (4 or 5) and confirm the conclusion that these students found considerable value in the activity.

| Item number/text | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2. How do you feel about Small Talk? | *I hate it.*<br><br>2 (1.6%) | *I don't like it.*<br><br>3 (2.4%) | *It's OK.*<br><br>44 (34.6%) | *I like it.*<br><br>**32 (25.2%)** | *I really like it.*<br><br>**46 (36.2%)** |
| 5. Did Small Talk help to improve your English speaking? | *not at all*<br><br>1 (0.8%) | *a little*<br><br>20 (15.6%) | *I'm not sure*<br><br>9 (7.0%) | *quite a lot*<br><br>**38 (29.7%)** | *It really helped.*<br><br>**60 (46.9%)** |

| 7. How do you feel about the teacher writing down your mistakes in Small Talk? | *I hate it.* 0 (0.0%) | *I don't like it.* 8 (6.7%) | *It's OK.* 35 (29.2%) | *I like it.* **39 (32.5%)** | *I really like it.* **38 (31.7%)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. How much does it help your English to see your mistakes and correct them? | *not helpful at all* 2 (1.7%) | *a little* 6 (5.0%) | *I'm not sure* 11 (9.1%) | *a lot* **47 (38.8%)** | *really helpful* **55 (45.5%)** |
| 13. Do you try to use the teacher's corrections in new conversations? | *never* 3 (2.5%) | *rarely* 7 (5.8%) | *sometimes* 38 (31.4%) | *often* **48 (39.7%)** | *always* **25 (20.7%)** |

**Table 1.** Student Responses to "Small Talk" Survey

## Conclusion

Communicative Language Teaching prioritizes the *use* of language, and teachers like Prasetianto are right to emphasize building oral fluency. However, information gap activities are just the first step: they offer a very controlled, restricted use of the language and are almost exclusively designed by the teacher (or textbook authors). In order to help students to really be able to make meaning, however, we need to create authentic opportunities for them to interact, to talk about topics that interest them, and to develop the communicative competence to do so, which includes increasingly complex – and accurate – language use. Small Talk is one approach to do this and much more. I hope that readers will consider this article a challenge to discover, invent, or adapt ways to develop more learner-centered methodologies for their own classrooms.

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