A Balance of Personal Fluency Performance and Responsiveness in L2 Dialogues

Renhao Duan

National University of Defense Technology, Hunan Changsha, China

`napoleoncamus@163.com`

Abstract. L2 dialogue assessment mostly acknowledges fluency as personal performance; however, recent research in dialogue fluency examines this concept both as individual linguistic competence and as a collaborative effort. This review article explores the evolving understanding of personal fluency and responsiveness between adjacent turns in a dialogue, crucial for effective and smooth communication. The review emphasizes the necessity of integrating both elements in L2 dialogue assessment, moving beyond fluency measures that solely focus on fluency as part of individual linguistic proficiency. Recognizing the co-constructed nature of fluency and the significance of responsiveness provides a comprehensive framework for assessing dialogue fluency. This synthesis informs pedagogical practices and assessment methodologies, fostering a holistic approach that captures the intricate relationship between personal fluency and responsiveness in L2 dialogues.

Keywords: fluency, personal performance, responsiveness, L2 dialogues

1 Introduction

In the era of globalization, communicating in a second language (L2) is becoming an increasingly important ability. Whether for personal or professional reasons, being able to engage in dialogues with people from different linguistic backgrounds can open up a multitude of opportunities. In L2 dialogues, fluency of one's turns and comprehension of interlocutors' utterances are important measures of one's speech performance and paramount for successful communication. However, L2 speakers often run into a dilemma between their own fluency performance and appropriate responsiveness to interlocutors' just uttered turn.

Previous studies of L2 fluency have mainly focused on fluency as individual performance in the measurement of fluency with monologue or dialogue tasks, rather than as co-constructed interactional fluency. According to Suzuki, Kormos, and Uchihara (2021) [32], L2 utterance fluency traditionally consists of three distinctive aspects (speed, pauses, and repair). Utterance fluency in L2 dialogues can be examined from both monadic and non-monadic perspectives (Feng, 2022; Pickering & Garrod, 2021) [5] [24]. The non-monadic perspective examines fluency as co-construction or joint

efforts between speakers in a dialogue. Among co-constructed utterance measures, responsiveness stands out as it guarantees how smooth and constructive a dialogue can be. Responsiveness includes various communicative behaviors such as acknowledging interlocutors' contributions, providing feedback, and extending and adapting to changing topics (Lam, 2018) [12].

Existing fluency studies mainly focus on monologues and pay little attention to dialogues, and those studies about dialogues fluency mainly focus on turn pause and individual performance (within-turn fluency/self-oriented fluency), but pay little attention to other fluency indicators in dialogues for co-construction (McCarthy, 2010; van Os et al., 2020) [18] [38]. Responsiveness to the previous turn, an important indicator of co-construction, has been studied in interactional competence studies, but less so in fluency studies (Peltonen, 2020) [20]. Additionally, the relationship between L2 interlocutors' own fluency performance and responsiveness has not yet received much scholarly attention (Peltonen, 2020, 2022) [20-21]. As keeping a balance between self-oriented fluency and responsiveness is important for the success of dialogues, the interplay between the two concepts is worthy of study. Fluency as personal performance affects various aspects of dialogues. For example, low fluency means interruptions or difficulties in maintaining a smooth exchange of ideas and information between speakers. However, excessive attention to personal fluency performance may hinder the development of strong rapport and connections with others due to the challenges posed by excessive attention to self-fluency performance at the sacrifice of responsiveness.

Understanding this phenomenon is crucial for language learners and educators alike, but research on this phenomenon is scarce. Therefore, this article reviews related literature and synthesizes what has or has not been studied, which may shed light on future research on fluency in L2 dialogues. Specifically, it aims to explore the link between "fluency as personal performance" and "responsiveness" in L2 dialogues, to provide a reference for psycholinguistics and applied linguistics researchers interested in speech production.

2   Fluency as Personal Performance in L2 Dialogues

Fluency measurement has received abundant scholarly attention. Segalowitz (2016) [29] argued that L2 fluency consists of three different but related dimensions: cognitive, utterance, and perceived fluency. In this perspective, cognitive fluency focuses on mobilizing and integrating the underlying cognitive processes. Utterance fluency refers to the measurable aspects of fluency such as speed, pausing, and hesitation (Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005) [36]. Perceived fluency is the assumption that listeners make about someone's cognitive fluency based on their impressions of how fluent the speaker is.

Fluency as personal performance in L2 dialogues is equivalent to within-turn utterance fluency, which is linked to how humans infer an L2 speaker's fluency in L2 dialogues. According to Suzuki and Kormos (2021) [32] and Skehan (2014) [30], utterance fluency can be divided into speed fluency, breakdown fluency, and repair fluency. As for speed fluency, pruned articulation rate is one of the most commonly used measures, which is determined by counting the number of syllables in a speech length in seconds

excluding pauses (Suzuki et al., 2021; Matsuura et al., 2022) [14] [32]. This is a pure speed measure. Other speed measures have also been examined in previous studies, such as speech rate and phonation time ratio (Skehan, 2014) [30]. Breakdown fluency is traditionally examined in terms of the length, frequency, and location (within- or between-clause pauses) of pauses. As for the minimum length of silent pauses, researchers have attempted to identify an ideal threshold for silent pause length and commonly define silent pauses as silence longer than 250 ms (De Jong, 2016; De Jong & Bosker, 2013) [3-4]. Repair fluency includes a range of disfluency phenomena such as self-corrections, false starts, and verbatim repetitions. There is an additional link between breakdown fluency and repair fluency (Williams & Korko, 2019) [41], as repairs can reflect the operation of self-monitoring processes (Kormos, 2014) [9] and offer opportunities for speakers to take time to deal with disruptions within speech production processes (Bui, Ahmadian & Hunter, 2019) [2]. Studies showed that repair fluency was consistent across first language (L1) and L2 production (Peltonen & Lintunen, 2016) [22] and L2 proficiency levels (Tavakoli et al., 2020) [35].

In addition to those three aspects of utterance fluency, researchers have shown that the smoothness of interactions can make a remarkable commitment to human evaluations of L2 oral fluency in dialogues (Tavakoli, 2016) [34]. Different studies have attempted to identify features related to the dialogic dimension of fluency, such as Peltonen's (2017) [19] study, including the number of conversational turns, the length of pauses, and the frequency of repeated words by an interlocutor. However, most second language acquisition (SLA) research has identified speed, pause, and disfluency features associated with human ratings of utterance fluency (Tavakoli & Wright, 2020) [37].

To sum up, fluency as personal performance in L2 dialogues can be approximated as utterance fluency in SLA research, which mainly includes speed fluency, breakdown fluency, and repair fluency. These measures can be used to measure speakers' fluency performance within their own turns. However, focusing on personal fluency might lead to neglect of the co-construction aspect in dialogues, which are a typical joint activity (Pickering & Garrod, 2021) [24]. L2 speakers may concentrate on producing their own turns at the sacrifice of interactional needs, such as properly responding to interlocutors.

3   Responsiveness in L2 Dialogues

The ability to interact with others is widely recognized as an indispensable part of L2 dialogues (Young, 2011) [42]. Interactional competence (IC) refers to an individual's ability to effectively engage in and manage interactions. It involves the understanding and application of appropriate communication strategies, norms, and behaviors within various social contexts (Kramsch, 1993, 2009) [10-11]. The core of IC is responsiveness, which is similar to the meaning of contingency, indicating the extent to which a speaker responds to and engages with their interlocutors (Borger, 2019) [1]. Many studies have emphasized the importance of "responding to" previous speakers' talk as a way of manifesting an understanding of the just-uttered turn (Ward, 1997) [39]. By

responding to interlocutors' just-uttered turn, L2 speakers build on each other's contributions through responsive actions, contributing to collaborative meaning-making and the development of IC. However, few studies have systematically explored what counts as responsiveness in L2 dialogues.

Recent studies by Lam (2018) [12] and Ross (2018) [26] offer nuanced insights into the complexities of IC. Lam's conversation analytic study reveals three distinct levels of responsiveness in student candidates' dialogues, encompassing formulation, accounting for (dis)agreement, and extension of previous speakers' ideas. Meanwhile, Ross (2018) [26] contributed to the understanding of IC by focusing on listener responses in L2 dialogues, particularly through the micro-analysis of audible backchannels, an aspect not conventionally covered by the prevailing grading assessment standards of IC, which typically include coherence, correctness accuracy, and fluency.

By showing one's intention to be a cooperative interlocutor, responsiveness or contingency in dialogues is crucial for effective communication as it reflects the ability to adapt to and build on the contributions of others and hence foster mutual understanding and collaboration (Lam, 2018) [12]. As such, appropriate responsiveness is conducive to the smooth flow of communication, ensuring that dialogue participants actively engage with each other's contributions (Galaczi, 2018) [7].

Previous studies on L2 dialogues show a growing interest in understanding responsiveness or contingency as part of interactional competence among language learners (Galaczi, 2014; 2018; Lam, 2018) [6-7] [12]. Researchers have investigated various aspects of how learners actively engage with their interlocutors, adapt to contributions, and navigate the intricacies of social and cultural contexts in L2 communication (May, 2009, 2011; May et al., 2019) [15-17]. Roever and Kasper's (2018) [25] study stood out for its emphasis on IC in second language acquisition. The research underscores the importance of learners' ability to produce and interpret responsive moves in dialogues, emphasizing the role of responsiveness in negotiating meaning and co-constructing mutual understanding in L2 dialogues. Interactional feedback in L2 peer interaction plays a crucial role in shaping learners' responsive behaviors (May et al., 2019) [17]. Moreover, increased sensitivity to contextual cues and the ability to adapt to diverse conversational contexts contribute to improved responsiveness performance among language learners (Taguchi, 2014) [33]. Some scholars focus on responsiveness in some other contexts, such as mother-child dialogues (Smith & McMurray, 2018) [31] and human-computer interfaces (Ward & Tsukahara, 2003) [40]. However, studies about responsiveness in L2 dialogues still represent an emerging research strand and are warranted further investigation.

Despite the importance of responsiveness in dialogues, L2 speakers often adopt a safe speaker stance, focusing more on their own speech production than on listening to their interlocutors interactively and then responding accordingly (He & Dai, 2006) [8]. Therefore, turns in L2 dialogues sometimes run parallel without proper logical cohesion and responsiveness between adjacent turns. L2 learning, teaching, and assessment for dialogues should find a balance between regarding speakers' contributions as personal performance and encouraging speakers to respond to each other in L1 dialogues.

4   Relationship Between Fluency as Personal Performance and Responsiveness

Fluency in dialogues represents a nuanced interplay between personal performance and co-construction (Peltonen, 2020, 2022; Sato, 2014) [20-21] [27]. Fluency, traditionally viewed as an individual's ability to express ideas seamlessly, is increasingly recognized as a co-constructed phenomenon shaped by interactive dynamics (Linell, 2009; Seedhouse, 2004) [13] [28]. While individual language proficiency contributes to personal fluency, dialogues inherently involve collaboration and responsiveness to interlocutors' contributions, emphasizing the co-constructed nature (Pickering & Garrod, 2013, 2021) [23-24]. As Seedhouse (2004) [28] argued, fluency is not merely the smoothness of an individual's speech but is intricately tied to the ability to participate in interactive communication, where responsiveness to the interlocutor's contributions is paramount. In this sense, the conventional view that fluency is solely a reflection of individual language competence neglects dialogue as a result of coordination among dialogue interlocutors (Linell, 2009) [13]. Therefore, fluency in dialogues should acknowledge responsiveness that contributes to effective and contextually appropriate communication. In this case, L2 speakers might not sacrifice interactive listening and responsiveness for seemingly fluent turns, which they regard as their own performance to be assessed or judged. As such, L2 learners can be compelled to take a more other-oriented speaker stance (Tavakoli & Wright, 2020) [37], allocating attentional resources simultaneously to listening and cognitive processing for their following turns (Tavakoli, 2016) [34].

If fluency is achieved at the sacrifice of responsiveness, it may result in a one-sided communication style lacking in mutual understanding and dynamic back and forth between speakers (Seedhouse, 2004) [28], and even a communication breakdown. Therefore, insufficient responsiveness suggests an inability to extend the dialogue to achieve effective and dynamic turn-taking (Linell, 2009) [13]. It is essential to recognize that fluency is most meaningful when balanced with responsiveness, ensuring that language use is not only smooth but also contextually appropriate and attuned to the communicative needs of the interaction. Given the interplay, Peltonen (2020, 2022) [20-21] proposed to include responsiveness as a measure of dialogue fluency.

5   Conclusions

In conclusion, the exploration of fluency in dialogues should recognize fluency as both personal performance and co-constructed endeavor. Fluency as personal performance is increasingly understood to be intertwined with the collaborative and interactive dynamics of dialogues. As a key feature of interaction, responsiveness in dialogues plays a pivotal role in effective language use. Responsiveness can be achieved by actively engaging with interlocutors, and building on and extending interlocutors' contributions. The balance between personal fluency and responsiveness can be tricky for L2 speakers who have to largely allocate attentional resources to produce their own turns. While

fluency as personal performance reflects an individual's linguistic proficiency, responsiveness enriches fluency by ensuring co-construction, mutual understanding, and interactional nature in dialogues. Thus, fluency as personal fluency and responsiveness are interconnected and together contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of fluency in dialogues. Recognizing the co-constructed nature of fluency can push L2 speakers to balance speech production and interactive listening. As such, language learners can better foster not only within-turn fluency but also collaborative fluency in dialogues. Future studies of L2 dialogues may take an empirical approach to explore the relationship between personal fluency measures and responsiveness, to provide feedback accordingly on L2 teaching, learning, and assessment.

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