3 Activities Using Authentic Media to Build Student Fluency

by [Jaime-Erin Parry](#) and [Elka KristóNagy](#)

Research has found that fluency is not always explicitly taught, because "…fluency is normally assumed to develop gradually with the development of [second language] proficiency and through exposure and practice inside and outside classrooms" (Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018). However, Tavakoli et al. (2016) argue for pedagogic intervention in the speaking classroom because fluency is often a criterion in second language (L2) speech assessment and a main objective for both programs and individuals.

In fact, research has shown that direct, explicit instruction targeting fluency helps students speak more easily and automatically. This article focuses on "classroom activities and practices that L2 fluency research has consistently reported to have positive effects on fluency" (Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018). The following activities have been used successfully with students and can be adapted to fit the goals and needs of any speaking classroom.

Activity 1: TED Talk Jigsaw

In the [TED Talk](#) Jigsaw exercise, each student/pair is given one section of the talk's transcript. Just as in a jigsaw puzzle, at first it can be hard to know how one individual piece fits into the bigger picture. Each student/pair is tasked with reading and understanding their portion of the transcript, pulling out three key words from the text, and writing a brief summary.

Then, students teach the key vocabulary and orally summarize their small portions of the TED Talk transcript for the group. Now the students have all the pieces of the "puzzle," understand the gist of the talk, and are ready to watch the TED Talk. After listening to the talk and taking notes, students work in small groups to talk through the discussion questions. The time for each part of this activity will depend on a variety of factors, including the length and complexity of the talk and the level of your students.

Preparation

1. Select a TED Talk or other talk that has both a video and a transcript and is less than 10 minutes long. You can select a topic that goes along with your class theme or is of interest to your students.
2. Divide the transcript into sections in a document. At this stage, you can differentiate according to your students' levels. Stronger students can be given longer or more complex portions.
3. Create a handout that gives students room for defining key words and summarizing the content. See Figure 1 (and Appendix A, "Transcript Jigsaw Worksheet").
4. Prepare two or three discussion questions.

---

1. Read your portion of the transcript.
2. Find three key words and look up the definitions:

   Word   Definition

   a. _____   _____
   b. _____   _____
   c. _____   _____

3. Write a brief summary in your own words.

Figure 1. Example of a Ted Talk Jigsaw activity handout.

Possible Expansion Activity

Turn the topic of the talk into a debate. Students work on opposing teams to plan arguments that defend their team's point of view in an informal debate.

Activity 2: Class Podcast Based on NPR's StoryCorps

Sharing stories or recounting past experiences makes up a large portion of our daily conversations and professional presentations. In this class podcast activity, students draft, share, revise, and record their own story inspired by National Public Radio's StoryCorps podcast. The podcast is used as a platform for sharing personal experiences while building accuracy, fluency, and connection in your classroom.

Preparation

1. Select three StoryCorps stories to listen to as a class.
2. Prepare the key vocabulary from each story to preteach.
3. Review the elements of a story to guide your students' writing.

In Class

Begin class by giving some background on StoryCorps. Then, introduce the main elements of a story, including setting, characters, climax, and resolution.

Focus on Listening

Listen to the preselected podcasts in class. We recommend one per class over several classes. For each podcast, preteach the vocabulary and have students take notes while listening.

After listening, students discuss the story and ask clarifying questions in pairs or small groups. They can use their notes to think through the elements of a story by answering:

1. What was the setting?
2. Who were the characters?
3. What was the climax?
4. What was the resolution or ending?

Next, discuss the types of stories they have heard—challenges overcome, problems solved, lessons learned, turning points in life, and so on. Ask students to think of a situation in their own lives that they would like to share in their own podcast.

Focus on Accuracy

Part I
Students work independently to write and submit a draft of their own story for instructor feedback. Feedback can focus on verb tenses and organization. Students then revise the written draft for accuracy.

Part II
In pairs, students take turns being the interviewer and interviewee. Student A shares their story. Student B has two jobs:

1. Role of the podcast host: to introduce and conclude the podcast.
2. Role of the interviewer: to think about how/where to interject one or two questions in their partner's podcast.

Pairs work together to write a podcast script and submit two complete podcast drafts that include the introduction, interview questions, and conclusion along with the revised story. Podcasts should be 2–3 minutes in length (350–450 words).

Focus on Pronunciation

Though you could have students target any aspect of pronunciation, this exercise lends itself to past tense pronunciation, question intonation, and thought groups/pausing.

Students should practice their podcast interviews with their partner several times before recording, making sure to incorporate their partner's introduction and questions. For each round of practice, give students a different focus targeting accuracy, pronunciation, and fluency.

Production

Pairs will work together to record their podcasts. Though a variety of free podcast platforms are available, the simple audio recording function on a phone or computer works fine for this exercise.

You can assign the recording as homework or set up your classroom as the "recording studio" and have students host the show live in class while recording.

Activity 3: News Reports

Individual students present a news article of their choice to the class and provide a handout (Appendix B) with a summary of their article, key vocabulary from the article, and one to two questions for group discussion. Students review strategies for avoiding plagiarism and develop language for expressing abstract ideas and opinions and hypothesizing in weekly small group discussions.

Presentation of Assignment

1. To model, present an article after teaching key vocabulary and referring to a sample handout (Appendix B).
2. Students discuss issues raised by the article in small groups. Each group summarizes their discussion.
3. After introducing the project, share instructions, assign the dates for individual news report presentations, and share media sources for students to consider using for their own presentations.

Student Presentation

Prior to their in-class talk, students create and submit their handout for instructor feedback. (See Appendix B, "News Reports Worksheet.") Once students have revised their handout, post the handout and the link to the article on your learning management system for the class to access.

Students present their news article to the class, sharing their handout. Provide quick written feedback on the presentation to the student.

Small Group and Plenary Discussion

In small groups of three or four, students review vocabulary, summarize the story, and discuss the article. Eavesdrop on student conversations and provide individualized feedback.

The groups then share what they discussed, opening the discussion to the entire class. Allow approximately 30 minutes for small group discussion and 15–20 minutes for the plenary.

Possible Variations

- Students can be assigned roles in their group discussions, such as discussion leader, timekeeper, vocabulary presenter, and cultural background reporter:

  - The discussion leader briefly summarizes the article, posing the discussion questions and making sure all participate in the conversation.
  - The timekeeper keeps track of the discussion time.
  - The vocabulary presenter reviews the given vocabulary and other relevant vocabulary.
  - The background reporter does research on anything that has sparked interest while reading the article that might give the discussion more depth and presents it to their small group.

- Students can assemble a vocabulary bank (or class dictionary) and can create quizzes for further practice.

- Students can practice expressions for hedging, interrupting politely, holding the floor, commenting on someone else's comments, posing different kinds of questions (e.g., asking for clarification or additional information), and challenging the presenter/speaker.

Conclusion

In these task-based activities that focus on authentic material, students take ownership of the successful execution and outcome of each task. As students systematically engage with target language media in various ways over the semester, they not only develop the language to express critical thinking but gain confidence in working independently on language proficiency.

References

Tavakoli, P., Campbell, C., & McCormack, J. (2016). Development of speech fluency over a short period of time: Effects of pedagogic intervention. *TESOL Quarterly*, *50*(2), 447–471.

Tavakoli, P., & Hunter, A. M. (2018). Is fluency being 'neglected' in the classroom? Teacher understanding of fluency and related classroom practices. *Language Teaching Research*, *22*(3), 330–349.

_____

Jaime-Erin Parry *is a senior lector in the English Language Program at Yale University. With a background in bilingual, multicultural education and TESOL, Jaime is passionate about helping graduate and professional students develop vocabulary, build fluency, and speak with clear pronunciation in their respective fields. She has presented on teaching strategies and best practices in teaching reading, writing, and fluency to students from a variety of language backgrounds.*

Elka KristóNagy *is a senior lector in the English Language Program at Yale University. She helps graduate students improve their general fluency as well as academic and professional communication skills. She has presented on corrective peer feedback, learner autonomy, and student-centered learning. Her interests also include fluency building and integrating culturally pragmatic competencies with linguistic skills development. At TESOL 2023, she will present on strategies for creating an inclusive neurodiverse classroom.*

Appendix A. Transcript Jigsaw Worksheet

Instructions

You have one piece of the transcript.

1. Read it. (Your part may be in the middle somewhere and so the context may seem strange.)
2. Select 3 key words to teach to the group.
3. Write a brief summary of your section of the talk. (This is for you; I will not collect or grade it.)
4. Teach the key words and summarize the talk orally to the class.

| Title of talk: |
| Link to the talk: |

Copy and paste a 1–2 minute section of the transcript below:

1. Find three key words and look up the definitions:

	Word	Definition
a.	_____	_____
b.	_____	_____
c.	_____	_____

2. Write a brief summary in your own words:

Appendix B. News Reports Worksheet

Link to the article:

With your group, briefly summarize the main points of the article presented. This is to put everyone on the same page and set the context for your discussion. Enter your notes below.

1	
2	
3	
4	

Go over the vocabulary together and any other possible forms or meanings of the words that you know of. You might list them in this chart.

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

Discuss the questions posed by the presenter. You may also use this space to jot down any other thoughts or questions you might like to put forward for group discussion.

Together, briefly summarize your discussion from today. Be prepared to share what was most interesting, for example, agreement or disagreement, any unanswered questions, anything that was surprising in your conversation today.