

# *The Effect of the 4/3/2 Technique on Students' Speaking Fluency*

*The Case of First Year LMD Students, Frères Mentouri  
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**Résumé:** Les étudiants algériens de l'Anglais langue étrangère semblent éprouver de sérieuses difficultés à développer une maîtrise de la communication orale dans cette ère de la mondialisation. Comme la compétence communicative est devenue un élément majeur dans l'acquisition et l'évaluation linguistique, la présente étude vise à étudier les effets de la technique 4/3/2 sur l'amélioration de la maîtrise de la parole des étudiants. Dix participants sont impliqués dans la pratique de cette technique sur une période de trois semaines trois sessions chacune, où chaque élève raconte la même conversation à trois reprises à différents auditeurs. Chaque fois, il réduit le délai de livraison à partir de quatre minutes dans le premier discours, à trois minutes dans le deuxième discours, à deux minutes dans le troisième. Les résultats révèlent que la répétition du même entretien trois fois donne des effets positifs sur l'amélioration de la vitesse de la parole, la précision et la concision du contenu, tout en réduisant leur hésitation.

**Mots clés :** technique 4/3/2, approche communicative, hésitations, précision grammaticale, le contrôle du contenu.

**Abstract:** Algerian EFL students seem to experience serious difficulties in developing an advanced speaking proficiency in this globalization era. As communicative competence has become a major component in language acquisition and evaluation, the present study aims at investigating the effects of the *4/3/2 technique* on improving students' speaking fluency. Ten participants are involved in practising this *technique* over a period of three weeks three sessions each, where each student tells the same talk three times to different listeners. Each time, he reduces the delivery time from four minutes in the first talk, to three minutes in the second talk, to two minutes in the third one. The results reveal that repeating the same talk three times yields positive effects on enhancing' fluency maximizing students' speaking speed, accuracy, and conciseness as well as reducing their hesitation and unwillingness.

**Keywords:** Speaking fluency, 4/3/2 technique, Communicative Approach, Communicative Language Teaching-CLT, hesitations, grammatical accuracy, control of the content

## **Introduction**

Gaining speaking proficiency has become a major goal for many second and foreign language learners who study English since language accuracy is no longer the major criterion in assessing students' success or failure in ESL/EFL; a more important factor is their fluency and competence to use the language for communication purposes.

Many Algerian EFL students are unable to speak fluently even after spending many years studying the foreign language because they have a little chance to converse in English beyond the classroom walls. As a matter of fact, speaking has become a challenge for them as they are required to master some sub-skills like pronunciation, stress, intonation, grammar, and vocabulary...etc. In addition, being slow and hesitant in conveying their messages has resulted in the feeling of anxiety and lack of confidence to speak creating a psychological barrier that has become clearly apparent in their reluctance and unwillingness to participate in the classroom.

A debate was raised among researchers on the changes to be brought about in the ways EFL is taught; the best solution for this situation is adopting an approach where more attention is directed to oral production practices following the principles of the communicative approach (Zhang, 2009: 33). As a matter of fact, the main concern of this study is to investigate to what extent, and how the 4/3/2 technique can improve Algerian EFL learners' speaking fluency.

## **Speaking under the traditional approaches**

In fact, the communicative approach came as a reaction to the traditional methods where teaching the language to facilitate authentic communication was totally neglected. The Grammar Translation method, for example, gave primacy to grammar analysis for the sake of translation from one language to another. The courses "have language itself as the focus of instruction to the extent that excessive emphasis on rules and paradigms teaches students a lot about language at the expense of teaching language itself" (Brown, 2001: 218).

Speaking has become the focus of the language under the Audio-lingual method where attention was directed towards the structural analysis of the spoken language. Mimicry, memorization, and practice of language patterns were considered as the basic tools to learn a language (Widiati and Cahyono, 2006: 271). However, it is worth mentioning that learners' objectives in using the language were not so clear (*ibid.*). This type of learning does not allow them to be ready to use the language in every day interactions (Oxford, 2001).

## **The Speaking Skill under the Communicative Approach**

The speaking skill did not gain primacy only under the communicative approach which emphasizes the use of the language for communication purposes (Oxford, Lavine and Crookall 1989, Savignon 1991, and Larsen-Freeman 2000). Hymes (1972), a proponent of the communicative competence, highlights the significance of the communicative competence stating that learning a language does not only require the linguistic competence but also the communicative one. Being in the same line, Advocates of whole language (Goodman, 1986, Weaver 1990, Edlesky, Altwerger and Flores 1991, Brooks-harper and Shelton, 2003) stress that language, used either in the written mode or the oral mode, should achieve a meaningful communication in order to fulfil authentic purposes.

### **The Significance of Speaking Fluency**

Speaking fluency is a significant component of oral proficiency which enables the speaker to transmit a communicative message by generating an uninterrupted speech without causing comprehension breakdowns for the listener (Yang, 2014: 226). Fillmore (1979) provides four definitions of fluency; the first of which considers it as the ability to talk at length with few pauses. Furthermore, fluency, according to Nation (1989: 377), includes three aspects: the speed and flow of language production, the degree of control of language items, i.e, pausing, rhythm, pronunciation, stress, and the way language and content interact. In the same vein, Nation and Newton in their book '*Teaching ESL/ EFL Listening and Speaking*' (2009) propose an approach to develop speaking and listening organized around four strands in a language course where fluency development is the ultimate strand which should be meaning focused. To achieve this goal, learners should be familiar with the content and should push themselves beyond their normal speed focusing on conveying the meaning. Fluency improvement should cover one quarter of the class time; this can be achieved via the implementation of some appropriate techniques such as the 4/3/2 technique delineated below.

### **The 4/3/2 Technique**

The 4/3/2 technique has been adopted to improve EFL students' speaking fluency. It was initially applied by Maurice (1983) and later by Nation (1989) and Arevart and Nation (1991), and then it has been under investigation by other researchers, namely Yang (2014 a, 2014b) in China and Movahed and Karkia (2014) in Iran. The current study takes the Algerian context to investigate the significance of the 4/3/2 technique and to see whether or not the results are consistent with the ones obtained in the previous studies.

Adopting the 4/3/2 technique requires a speaker to deliver the same talk to three different listeners in varying periods of time. The first delivery lasts four minutes, the second three minutes, and the third two minutes. In the second and third deliveries the speaker pushes himself beyond his normal speaking speed focusing on conveying the same message to the three listeners. Changing the audience enables the speaker to focus on the message as if it is delivered for the first time, repeating the same talk three times increases his familiarity with the topic at hand, and decreasing the time in the second and third deliveries puts the speaker under time pressure to increase his speed.

### **Research Questions**

This study attempts to assist Algerian EFL students to promote their speaking fluency by adopting the 4/3/2 technique which follows the guidelines of the communicative approach. The research questions to be addressed in this article are the following:

1. Can Algerian EFL students promote their speaking fluency?
2. Does the 4/3/2 technique assist Algerian EFL students in developing their speaking fluency (speed, pausing, grammatical accuracy, and control of the content)?

### **Participants**

The current piece of research takes the case of first year LMD students at the English department, University Frères Mentouri, Constantine. The participants have an intermediate level of proficiency, and they have studied English for at least seven years (four years in the

middle school and three years in the high school). They study oral expression two sessions a week 90 minutes each. The study sample consists of 10 students randomly selected. It is limited to this number because the 4/3/2 technique requires a considerable time and energy from the researcher for its administration and transcription and analysis of the three deliveries provided by each participant.

### Instruments

Before the experiment, students were given a checklist of subjects of general interest from which they selected the topics they preferred to speak about (see table 1). To practise the 4/3/2 technique, the participants were given enough time to prepare the topic at hand; then each one delivered three speeches about the topic to three different listeners. The 4/3/2 technique was performed three times a week, and the intervention lasted for three weeks.

Topic	Students' Preference %
Describe a family tradition	27.02
Describe your favourite/least favourite meal	59.45
Describe something that makes you happy, sad, nervous, afraid	83.78
Describe your ideal teacher.	40.54
Speak about the most memorable movie you have seen.	29.72
Speak about an important lesson that you have learnt.	18.91
Describe your family.	35.13
Speak about your first day at the university	86.48
Describe how you keep a healthy life style.	16.21
Tell us about dreams in your life.	78.37
Describe your future plan and plan for future.	51.35
Introduce one of your best friends.	48.64
Do a self- introduction.	10.81
Describe a music trend or style/fashion trend that you love or you hate.	27.02
In what period of your life you have felt the most free?	21.62
In what way do you feel different today than you did ten years ago?	5.40
Is there anyone or anything that really inspires you?	43.24
Tell us about a way to travel that interests you ( by bicycle, train, plane, hot air balloon)	29.72
Speak about a place you travelled to and you liked the best.	97.29
Tell us about the last time you celebrated a special holly day.	18.91
A break up of a friendship.	51.35
A dangerous experience.	37.83
An act of heroism.	18.91
An experience that made you laugh until you cried.	40.54

A secret that you could not keep that created troubles /happiness.	16.21
The best day ever/the worst day you have ever lived.	83.78

**Table 1: Students' Preference for the Topics They Would Like to Talk about****Procedure**

Before its application, the researcher had to make sure that the topics to be dealt with are of students' interest, vocabulary and content are familiar to them, and the activity focuses on meaning. This technique has been adopted in three steps.

- **Step One: Explaining the 4/3/2 Technique**

Before indulging in the experiment, the guidelines for practising the 4/3/2 technique were explained for the students. The researcher set out the aim of this procedure -improving their speaking fluency- and clarified that this technique requires the speaker to repeat the same talk three times to three different listeners. The speech is to be delivered to the first listener in four minutes, to the second listener in three minutes, and to the third one in only two minutes. It was also made clear that the speaker should focus on meaning, i.e., he can skip unnecessary details and change sentence structure to meet time constraints. The listeners should not interrupt the speaker or ask questions.

- **Step Two: Practicing the 4/3/2 Technique**

The researcher prepares his equipments (cell phone) to record the three deliveries then signals the start. In the first delivery, the speaker talks for four minutes at his normal speed without interruption. When he finishes the first speech, he changes his partner and speaks about the same topic to another listener. This time he pushes himself up to give the same delivery in three minutes. In the third delivery, the speaker tries to keep track of both speed and meaning within a shorter duration of time (two minutes). When the first speaker finishes the three deliveries, he becomes a listener, as it is explained in the following table:

Speech	Participants: speaker1 – listener1 – listener2 – listener3
1 <sup>st</sup> speech: 4 minutes	Speaker1 → listener1
2 <sup>nd</sup> speech: 3 minutes	Speaker1 → listener2
3 <sup>rd</sup> speech: 2 minutes	Speaker1 → listener3

**Table 1: Application of the 4/3/2 Technique**

While practicing the 4/3/2, the researcher discovered that the participants were not able to talk about a given topic for four minutes even though they were provided with sufficient time to prepare their talks. After many attempts, it was noticeable that this is the case of all the participants. This may be explained by the fact that the participants in the experiment are freshmen who have an intermediate level of proficiency, i.e., they have not yet developed a good mastery of the language; this is clearly shown in the difficulties they endure while speaking. For this reason, we decided to adapt the technique under investigation from the 4/3/2 to the 3/2/1 technique to meet students' level.

- **Step Three: Transcribing and Analysing the Gathered Data**

The three speeches of each speaker are to be recorded then transcribed and analysed. The transcription of the three deliveries of each speaker has taken the researcher one hour and a

half. The three talks are then analysed taking into account the improvement in speaking speed, the decrease in the number of hesitations and grammatical errors, and the progress in the control of the content.

## Data Analysis

### a. Speaking Fluency

Students' speaking fluency encompasses two elements: students' speaking speed and their hesitations.

- **Speaking Speed**

The speaking speed of each delivery is calculated by dividing the number of words spoken by the time spent; then, the speaking speed of the last talk is compared with the speed of the second and first ones to measure the improvement. The findings are illustrated in the following table:

Subjects	w/m in the First Delivery (3minutes)	w/m in the Second Delivery (2 minutes)	w/m in the Third Delivery (1 minute)	Percentage Increase %
1	117.33	123.76	150.98	28.67
2	113.55	138.66	161.05	41.83
3	120.83	120	138.01	14.21
4	103.41	173.23	199.16	92.59
5	136.77	181.06	164.48	20.26
6	105.66	146.66	150	41.96
7	142.91	172.86	144.82	1.33
8	135.80	132.85	175.20	29.01
9	149.75	201.49	186.52	24.55
10	114.08	147.96	128.30	12.46
<b>Average</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>153.85</b>	<b>159.85</b>	<b>30.68</b>

**Table 2: Students' Speaking Speed in the Three Deliveries**

As shown in the table above, the participants have scored an average speaking speed of 124 words per minute in the first delivery and 159.85 words per minute in the third one. We may easily deduce that students have increased their speed in the third talk, and a difference of 35.85 words is reached. This explains that the learners have shown a progress in their speaking speed with a percentage of 30.68%. All the participants have witnessed this improvement without any exception.

- **Hesitations**

The number of hesitations is calculated for every 100 words by counting students' hesitations including (Ah, um), repetitions of words, false starts, repairs, and sentence

incompletion. The number of the participants' hesitations in the three deliveries is summarised in the following table:

Subjects	Hesitations per 100 Words in the 1 <sup>st</sup> Delivery	Hesitations per 100 Words in the 2 <sup>st</sup> Delivery	Hesitations per 100 Words in the 3 <sup>st</sup> Delivery	Percentage Decrease %
1	15.90	18.4	12.98	18.36
2	34.97	17.78	12.41	64.51
3	15.17	14.81	8.98	40.80
4	2.89	3.52	1.25	56.74
5	10.49	10.87	11.32	-7.91
6	20.08	14.14	10	50.19
7	10.49	12.10	13.57	-29.36
8	14.46	19.27	12.73	11.96
9	12.37	8.51	3.49	71.78
10	2.46	4.94	3.67	-49.18
<b>Average</b>	<b>13.92</b>	<b>12.43</b>	<b>9.04</b>	<b>22.78</b>

**Table 3: Students' Hesitations in the Three Deliveries**

With regard to students' number of hesitations, table 3 clearly illustrates that 7 participants out of 10 (70%) have made less hesitations in the third delivery than in the first one. On average they have produced 13.92 hesitations in the first speech and 9.04 in the third one with a percentage of 22.78% decrease. This means that students have been successful in giving the same speech within a shorter time (1 minute) with fewer hesitations. It is worth mentioning that some participants (subject 2 and subject 9) have reached a decrease in the number of hesitations equal to 64.51 and 71.78 respectively. Three students only (subjects 5, 7, 10) have failed to minimise the number of hesitations in the third delivery although they have been able to increase their speaking speed.

#### **b. Grammatical Accuracy**

While giving the three deliveries, the participants have committed some grammatical errors. The most common ones concern subject-verb agreement, tense shift, and sentence structure in very few cases. The main reason behind making these specific types of mistakes can be explained by the fact that the speakers were pushing themselves beyond their normal speed to meet time constraints; hence, they focused their attention on conveying the meaning in as a shorter period of time as possible and failed to preserve accuracy. The number of the grammatical errors committed in every 100 words in the three deliveries is calculated and summarised in the following table:

Subjects	Grammatical Errors per 100 Words in the 1 <sup>st</sup> Delivery	Grammatical Errors per 100 Words in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Delivery	Grammatical Errors per 100 Words in the 3 <sup>rd</sup> Delivery	Percentage Decrease %
1	1.13	1.6	1.29	<b>-14.15</b>
2	4.11	2.40	2.61	36.49
3	0.68	0.61	0.59	13.23

4	0.41	0.81	1.36	12.19
5	2.62	1.25	1.25	52.29
6	2.23	3.03	2.85	<b>-27.80</b>
7	1.16	1.79	1.42	38.79
8	3.22	2.54	3.77	<b>-17.08</b>
9	1.95	1.85	1.39	28.71
10	1.64	1.09	0.73	49.72
<b>Average</b>	<b>1.83</b>	<b>1.69</b>	<b>1.65</b>	<b>17.23</b>

**Table 4: Students' Grammatical Errors in the Three Deliveries**

As shown in table 4 above, while moving from the first to the third talk, the participants have managed to reduce the number of grammatical errors from an average of 1.83 in the first delivery to an average of 1.65 in the third one with a percentage decrease of 17.23. About 70% of the participants (7 out of 10) have been successful in minimising their grammatical errors; some cases have even reached 52.29% and 49.72% (subjects 5 and 10) decrease respectively. Three students, on the other hand, failed to reduce the number of grammatical errors probably because of time pressure, especially in the second and third deliveries.

### **c. Control of Content**

With regard to the participants' control of content, especially that the 4/3/2 technique is a meaning focused activity, all the members of the sample have been successful in maintaining the message of the first delivery. They have been able to skip all the unnecessary details to keep the very essential information in the third delivery within a short period of time. Some of them have been very flexible in using the grammatical structures for the sake of preserving the meaning and in the same time meeting time limits.

## **Discussion of the Results**

Although the 4/3/2 technique is adapted to the 3/2/1 to meet the students' level, the results are consistent with the previous research. First of all, all the participants have improved their speaking speed in the third delivery. Two participants have witnessed an increase reaching 41%, and another one has dramatically augmented his speed with 92% (table 2).

As far as students' hesitations are concerned, the majority of them decreased the number of hesitations (repetitions, false starts, sentence incompleteness...etc) in the third talk. Two participants have reached a decrease of 64.51 and 71.78. Three participants, on the other hand, have failed to reduce the number of hesitations although they have managed to improve their speaking speed in the third delivery (table 3).

With regard to the grammatical errors committed by the students, seven students out of ten have been successful in minimising the number of grammatical mistakes in the third speech. Three students only failed to decrease the number of grammatical errors although they have been successful in improving their speaking speed and in decreasing the number of hesitations in the third delivery (tables 4, 3, and 2); this may be explained by the fact that time pressure has prevented the participants from focusing on the meaning and grammatical accuracy simultaneously.

Concerning students' control of the content in the third speech, participants have been able to skip all unnecessary information to focus only on the message they want to send to the



listener, of course, to meet time constraints. Although the majority of them have repeated the same grammatical structures in the three deliveries, some of them managed to vary sentence structures in the third speech.

### Conclusion

On the whole, the 4/3/2 technique has proved to be very successful and helpful in assisting the students in improving their speaking fluency. We have marked an average increase in speaking speed equal to 30.68 %, an average decrease in the participants' hesitations reaching 22.78%, an average decrease in grammatical errors equal to 17.23%. The findings were very positive not only because the technique itself was very motivating to the participants but also because of the improvements they witnessed in terms of the confidence they gained in the second and third talks. The results obtained in the present study are consistent with the ones obtained in the research previously conducted (Nation, 1989; Arevart and Nation, 1991, Movahed & Karkia, 2014; Yang, 2014). Eventually, we strongly agree with Yang (2014:230) when he asserts that knowing how to improve speaking fluency is important but challenging at the same time, but we believe that with more practice students could even do better.

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## APPENDIX

### A Transcript of a 4/3/2 Talk Topic: The Worst Day in My Life

#### The Three-Minute Delivery

Life is full of memories **eh** some of them are good and others are bad. **eh** well **eh** I will talk about my first my worst day. **Eh** I always wake up at 6 o'clock but in that day my alarm didn't ring. I **eh** opened my eye when I opened my eyes it was 7'00 clock. So I **eh** jumped from my bed and I start hurrying and ruing everywhere. When I **eh** went out the house eh I didn't took the breakfast and I put mascara in one eye and I forgot the other eye. And **eh** when **eh** I **eh** arrived to the bus station I found a creasy man he through **eh** out **eh** a tomato on me and my clothes were **eh** dirty, and when eh when eh I get to the bus I **eh** discovered that I forget my wallet and I had no money so I didn't pay. When I arrived here **eh** to **eh** the university it was rainy and my shoes where covered with mud. I was so angry and I was on my nerves. I was talking to myself and **eh** complaining. People who were eh who were passing through me they thought that I am crazy and **eh** when I arrived to the big door of the university **eh** the security man asked me to give to show him the credit my credit card I forget it in the wallet it was in the wallet. So **eh** I had a fight with him, then I came back home I was so angry I didn't want to came to the university. So **eh** when **eh** I found mum she was sick I **eh** cooked the dinner and then I **burn** it, dad start complaining and blaming me so we ate eggs. It was the worst day that I had ever lived, but despite all this **eh** when I remember this day I start laughing on my fools.

**NB:** The words which are written in bold represent the speaker's hesitations, and the underlined parts are the mistakes he committed. The latter can take the form of repetitions, false starts, repairs, or grammatical mistakes.

#### The Two-Minute Delivery

Life is full of memories **eh** some of them are good but others are bad. **Eh** I will talk about my worst day **eh** I **eh** used to **eh** get up at 6 o'clock that day I **eh** opened my eyes at 7 o'clock. I start hurrying I I **eh** went out from the house and I put mascara in one eye and the other forgot the other eye, and **eh** when I **eh** arrived to the bus station I found a crazy man. He through old tomato on me and and my clothes were dirty and when I get in **eh** the bus I **eh** discovered that that I forget my wallet and I had no money so I didn't pay and when **eh** I arrived to **eh** the university it was raining and my shoes was were covered with mud. I was on my nerves and I was so angry and I was **eh** complaining. People who were passing by me thought that I was crazy **eh** then I arrived to the big door of the university I **eh** the security man asked me to show my credit card I forget it in the wallet. So I had a big fight with him and then I came back home and **eh** my mom was sick I cook the dinner and I burn it . It was the worst day that I have ever lived but **eh** each day each time I **eh** remember that day I laugh of my fooly.

### **The One-Minute Delivery**

Life is full of memories some of them are good and others are bad. I will talk about my first eh my worst day. **Eh** I always get up wake up **eh** at 6 but that day I was very late and **eh** where I **eh** went out from the house I put **eh** mascara in one eye and I forgot the other. When I arrived to the bus station a crazy man throw old tomato on me and I when I get in **eh** the bus I discovered that I forget my wallet and I didn't pay. When **eh** I **eh** I arrived to the university it was rainy and my shoes were covered with mud and **eh** I had a big fight with the security man because of the credit card which I forget it at home when I came back home I **eh** cooked the dinner and I burn it. I **eh** each day each day I **eh** each time I remember this day I start laughing on my fooly.