



ELS-JISH

ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies on Humanities

Volume 2 Issue 1, 2019

ISSN (print) : 2621-0843

ISSN (online) : 2621-0835

Homepage : <http://journal.unhas.ac.id/index.php/jish>

Silent Pauses in the Speech of Yemeni EFL Learners

Abeer Al-Ghazali¹, Yasser Alrefaae²

yasser.alrefaae@gmail.com

Abstract

Speaking fluently is characterized not only by the speed of oral delivery but also by the absence of non-fluent pauses. This paper aims at investigating the pausing phenomena in the speech of the Yemeni learners of English. It investigated three aspects of silent pauses, the frequency, the placement and the length. The data were collected from 20 level four students enrolled in the Department English Language, Faculty of Education, Taiz University. The participants were recorded narrating the events of a short silent video immediately after watching it. Data were analyzed quantitatively utilizing the waveform spectrogram software called PRAAT. The findings showed that the Yemeni EFL learners overused non-fluent silent pauses. Additionally, they paused in the middle of the clauses rather than at the clause boundaries. With respect to the mean length of silent pauses, the speech of the EFL learners at Taiz University was full of long silent pauses which took one-third of the total speaking time. Therefore, it is highly suggested that the teachers of English should draw the learners' attention to the notion of pausing and its effect on speaking fluency in order to lessen or avoid it. Teachers should also vary their activities to help the learners speak fluently without much pausing.

Keywords: Speaking Fluency, Yemeni EFL learners, Speech Speaking fluency, non-fluent pauses, silent pauses.

How to cite: Al-Ghazali A & Alrefaae. (2019). Silent Pauses in the Speech of Yemeni EFL Learners. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 2 (1), 39.

1. Introduction

One of the most important elements of speaking fluency features is the pausing. The presence or absence of the pauses greatly influences the notions of smoothness and naturalness of speech production (Wood, 2005). Moreover, analysis of pauses is always involved in the evaluation of speaking fluency in the literature. For example, according to Little et al. (2012), "The temporal properties of speech, particularly pause durations, provide an interface between externally observable behaviour and the underlying cognitive processes involved in speech production." (p. 2)

Generally speaking, L2 learners face difficulties while learning and while practicing the learned language. Ur (1996) sums up the difficulties of speaking a language other than the mother tongue into four main difficulties; namely, inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation and mother-tongue use. Inhibition, according to Ur, refers to the students being afraid of making mistakes. Fearing criticism and being shy also inhibit the

¹ Taiz University, Yemen ² Albaydaa University, Yemen

learners to speak the second or foreign language. This is a factor that affects speaking fluency, that is, when the learners are afraid of mistakes, they are probably more hesitant and speak with more silent pauses. The second difficulty, named by Ur as nothing to say, is related to motivation which is the motive behind speaking and participating in a speaking activity. The third difficulty, low or uneven participation, is related to the context where the learners have fewer chances to speak when being in large classes. Some learners get no chance to speak due to the tendency of some other learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all. The last difficulty is the use of the mother-tongue. Learners who share the same mother-tongue tend to use it because it is easier and because learners feel no need to use the learned language as long as they can communicate their messages in their mother tongue. In fact, all the above mentioned difficulties are supposed to lead the language learners to sue silent pauses more often. Those difficulties are possibly found in most EFL classes and in the learning context of EFL at Yemeni Universities.

According to Levelt's (1989) model of speech, speech is composed out of three processing components, a conceptualizer, a formulator, and an articulator. The conceptualizer is responsible for conceptualizing the message, i.e., generating the ideas or the content of the message. This is called by Levelt as Phase One. The formulator is responsible for formulating the language presentation, i.e., giving grammatical and phonological shape to the messages. This stage is called Phase Two. The third phase is called the articulator which is responsible for articulating the language, i.e., executing the message. To put it differently, it can be said that before the production of speech, the message to be communicated passes through those three successive processes. Bosker (2014) mentions that disfluency arises from the difficulties in one or all the three processes of language production of Levelt's (1989) model. That is, a speaker might have a problem in finding out what to say, Phase One of Levelt's (1989) model, in choosing the right codes or structures to encode his ideas into language, Phase Two, or in executing the phonetic material, the articulation phase. Studies on native and non-native speech state that both L1 and L2 speakers are equal in encountering problems with the first stage of the cognitive processes of speech production. The reason, as stated by De Bot, (1992), is that some of the processes involved in the conceptualization phase are non-linguistic. Another difficulty which is related to L2 learners is assigning particular structure to the conceptualized message, (Segalowitz, 2010). Such language related difficulty causes the language learners to pause while speaking. There is little research on pausing phenomena in the Yemeni context. This paper aims at investigating the silent pauses used by the Yemeni EFL learners at one of the Yemeni Universities, Taiz University.

2. Objectives

This paper aims to identify the nature, placement and mean length of the silent pauses during the speech of the Yemeni EFL learners. It has the following objectives:

1. To investigate the frequency of the silent pauses used by the Yemeni EFL learners in a minute of speech.
2. To examine the placement of the silent pauses used by the EFL Yemeni learners in the structure of the clause.
3. To measure the mean length of the silent pauses used by the EFL Yemeni learners.

3. Literature Review

A silent pause is a breakdown of speech lasting at least 0.2 to 0.25 seconds (Kormos and Denes, 2004). Cenoz (1998) investigated the use of pauses as a strategy in foreign language production. Pauses and hesitation were regarded as a problem when speaking a second language, but according to Cenoz pauses can have several functions

1. to allow the speaker to breathe.
2. to allow the speaker to plan his speech.
3. to mark demarcations in the speech.

In conversational speech, pauses can also be used to hand over the turn to another speaker. There are two types of pauses, silent pauses and pauses filled by mm, ah, er etc. and there are different views on what these different types of pauses signify; but they tend to occur in the same positions. Researchers have also tried to differentiate pauses between phrases from pauses within clauses. Cenoz (1998) investigated 15 intermediate and advanced learners of English at the University of the Basque Country who had Spanish as their first language in terms of their pauses within sentences. Then, he looked at the type of pauses silent and filled as well as the length of the silent pauses, their distribution in the sentence, the hesitation markers used in the case of the filled pauses (um,eh,ah) and their association with communication difficulties (self-correction, reformulation, repetition). The result of his investigation was that the students used 1085 within clause pauses in total with 64% silent pauses and 36% filled ones. More than 90 % percent of the pauses were two seconds or shorter. Both silent and filled pauses had the same functions as mostly planning pauses, and more silent pauses than filled pauses were used when a student had problems finding the right vocabulary. The disfluencies found in Cenoz's (1998) study were mostly repetitions, and self-corrections, and they were found to be used more together with silent pauses than with filled pauses.

While studying pausing, researchers focus on three aspects of pausing; namely, frequency, placement and duration. Empirical researchers who have examined pause locations and fluency have generally found that syntactic location of pauses is a very strong indicator of fluent or non-fluent speech (Freed, 1995). That is, highly fluent non-native speakers and native speakers tend to pause at sentence and clause junctures, or between non-integral components of clauses. Pausing at other points within sentences gives the impression of disfluency, Wood (2004). Disfluency features, which are carried out by various means as repetition, reformulation and false starts, do not necessarily mean there is an error in the speech. They can be taken as one of the forms of disfluency when the speaker hesitates because he or she needs more time for further planning of speech and speaking.

4. Methodology

This paper investigates the silent pauses of the Yemeni EFL learners. It examines the number of silent pauses, the placement of the silent pauses and the mean length of the silent pauses. Therefore, the researcher used descriptive–analytical method. Firstly, the data is collected from the subjects. Then, the speeches are analyzed in terms of the presence or absence of silent pauses and their placement in relation to the clause boundaries. After that, the length of the pause is measured and calculated as part of the total speaking time.

4.1. Data collection

Studies on fluency usually involve a few number of participants because they investigate the temporal features in speech production. For instance, there were 11 participants involved in the research done by Bulc et al. (2010), 16 by Kormos and Denes (2004), and there were 12 participants in Poulisse (1999) (as cited in Kormos, 2006) . This paper studies one aspect of the temporal measures of fluency namely pausing. The population of the present study was all the Level Four students at the Department of English Language, Faculty of Education, Taiz University in the second semester of the academic year 2014/ 2015. The total number of the fourth level students was (86) learners, (7) male and (79) female. The sample of this study were chosen systematically from level four of the second semester of the academic year 2014-2015. In order not to encounter problems regarding the proficiency level of the selected L2 learners, which may affect speaking fluency level, the researcher intentionally conducted the study on advanced learners who have spent three years and half studying English at college level. Selecting the sample from level four guarantees that the participants have received the training program in the Department of English at the Faculty of Education, Taiz University. The gender factor was not taken into account; because the male learners are very few in comparison with the female ones as mentioned in the population of the study. Only one male student was present in the systematically selected sample. Systematic sampling occurs when the researcher takes a sample of the target population at equal or regular intervals. This way means that all the population of the research have an equal chance of being selected and there is no bias. This selecting method was used in the present study. The fourth ranked number was systematically picked out among the Level Four alphabetized list. However, due to the unsafe conditions Taiz City passed through in the beginning of the year 2015, some of the selected participants could not come to be recorded. Therefore, another group of participants were selected by picking the fifth ranked number of the same alphabetized list of level four.

4.2. The Speaking Task

The speech elicitation tasks in the literature are of three categories as classified by Segalowitz (2010). The first category is a reading task in which the participants read a text. The second category is picture description task in which the participants are asked to make a story based on a sequence of photos without words or on silent films. The third category is a story retelling task in which the participants read or listen to a story first and then retell it. The best task type that matches the present study is the second task, the making of a story based on a silent film or on a sequence of pictures. The researcher selected a silent video that was easy to be talked about. The story of the video is of two people, a man and a woman, waiting for the train. A thief comes out of a sudden and steals the lady's bag. The man who is sitting next to her runs after the thief and brings the bag back to the lady. She feels happy and gives him a big hug. The man gets surprised at the hug. Then the train comes, and the lady gets on while the man happily waves 'Goodbye' to her. However, in the train, the lady smiles and checks a wallet in her hand. She finds money in it because when she hugged the man she actually stole his wallet from his bag. As the topic of the video is easy to grasp and has an unexpected end, all the participants were able to talk naturally about it.

4.3. Procedures

After the participants had watched the video, they went into the recording room and were given a paper that contained the same story of the video in consequent pictures so as not to lose the events (see Appendix A).

An excerpt of two minutes was taken from each subject. The participants' speeches were transcribed and named as (Speaker 1, Speaker 2, ...etc).

4.4. Tools of Analysis

PRAAT

The silent pauses were examined through a software program called PRAAT. PRAAT is a software package made and maintained by Paul Boersma and David Weenink (2007) available online for free at www.praat.org. In this study, the Version 5.4 (2014) of the PRAAT software was used. PRAAT has been used as a tool to measure fluency temporal features by previous studies (such as Kormos and Dénes 2004 and Jong and Wempe 2009). PRAAT software made it easier to make sure of the transcriptions as it shows each 10 seconds separately and the spectrograms clearly showed the words, the silent pauses and the duration of pauses in milliseconds. In the transcriptions, the researcher used parentheses () for the silent pauses showing the duration of the pause in milliseconds inside the parentheses.

4.5. Data Analysis

Number of silent pauses per minute

It is a general fact that non-native speakers speak slower than natives and use much filled and silent pauses that leads to less comprehensibility (Cucchiari et al., 2002; Tavakoli, 2010; Bosker, 2014). According to the samples analyzed in the present study (as can be seen in Figure 1 below), there were so many non-fluent silent pauses that occurred when the L2 learners delivered their speech. The frequent non-fluent silent pauses produced might indicate that the learners are more hesitant and less competent in the language learned. According to Tavakoli (2010) information processing load is related to the L2 acquisition, and it is manifested in pausing, repetitions and self-corrections.

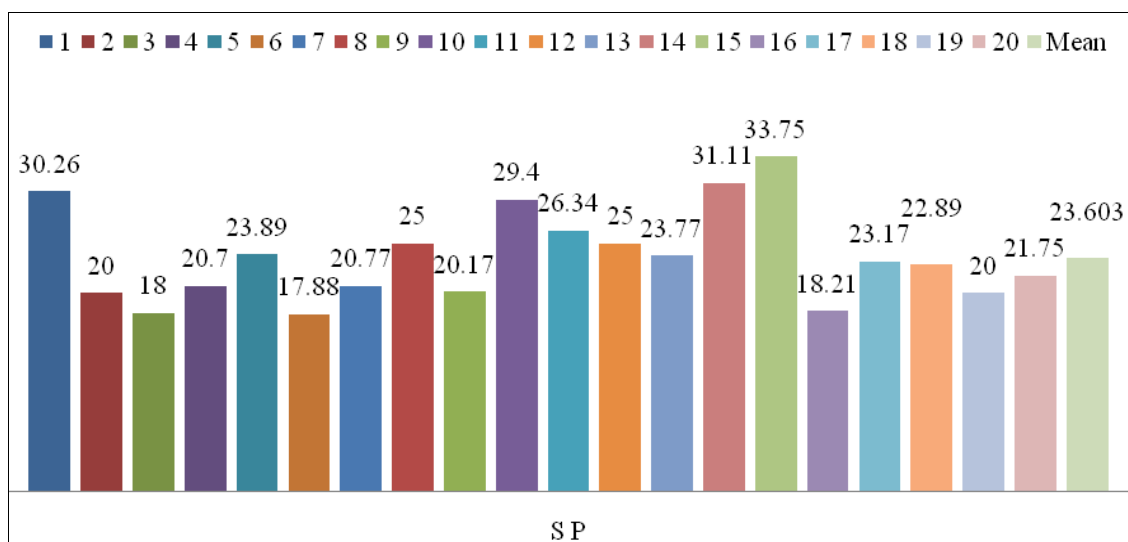


Figure 1. The Participants' Number of Silent Pauses

According to Kormos and Denes (2004) and Hilton (2008), pauses of less than 0.25 seconds are the norm between clauses, and it is rare to pause more than 0.5 seconds in mid-clause, unless for emphasis or to breathe. Pauses are found in L1 speech production and are mostly used in order to give the speaker time to organize his thoughts and to give the listener time to process incoming speech, Hilton (2008).

As can be seen in Figure 1 above, the highest number of silent pauses produced by the EFL learners at Taiz University was 33.75 pauses per minute (Speaker 15). This means, for Speaker 15, half the minute is spent in non-fluent silent pauses. Additionally, the average number of silent pauses was 23.6 per minute. It is important to mention here that a silent pause of less than 0.25 seconds was not taken to be counted as a pause following the previous studies because it has been agreed upon that it is a natural pause (Towell et al., 1996; Bulc, et al., 2010; Bosker 2014).

Silent pause placement

An important aspect of pausing is the pause placement in relation to the sentence or the clause. According to (Wood 2004), fluent L2 speakers and native speakers tend to pause at sentence and clause junctures. He also refers to pausing at other points within sentences and clauses as a sign of disfluency.. Following Thakur (2009), clause and sentence boundaries depend upon the type of the verb present in the sentence or the clause. That is, according to Thakur (2009), a clause minimally consists of a finite or non-finite verb with at least one other clause element, such as a subject, object, or complement. The finite verb refers to the verb that carries the tense and the non-finite verb is the non-tensed one. Table 1 shows the pause placement in the structure of the sentence or the clause.

Table 1. The Participants' Number of Fluent and Non-Fluent Silent Pauses

Speaker number	Pauses at clause boundary	Pauses in the middle of the clause	Total
S (1)	6	51	57
S (2)	13	25	38
S (3)	6	31	37
S (4)	15	24	39
S (5)	18	29	47
S (6)	14	32	32
S (7)	9	18	27
S (8)	11	40	51
S (9)	13	25	38
S (10)	21	28	49
S (11)	5	49	54
S (12)	9	21	30
S (13)	10	11	21
S (14)	8	20	28

S (15)	5	31	36
S (16)	11	24	35
S (17)	14	25	39
S (18)	11	19	30
S (19)	7	14	21
S (20)	11	18	29
Mean	10.85	26.75	37.6
Maximum	21	51	57
Minimum	5	11	21
Percentage	28.9	71.1	

With respect to pause placement, it is clear from Table 1 that the number of the non-fluent pauses in the middle of the clause exceeds the number of the pauses at the clause boundaries. That is, of all the silent pauses, only 28.9 % of the pauses were at clause boundary while 71.1 % of the silent pauses were present in the middle of the clauses. The maximum number of the non-fluent silent pauses used by the participants was 51 non-fluent pauses per minute by Speaker (1) while speaker (13) used the minimal non-fluent silent pauses (11 non-fluent pauses per minute). Moreover, all the speakers overused the silent pauses, whether they occurred at clause boundaries or at non- clause boundaries.

Examples of pauses are given below:

Examples (1): Pauses in the middle of a phrase, or between the verb and its complement:

(S2)She suffer from (404) problem

(S2)When the train (1.057) arrived,

(S4) she was so (534) confused

(S7) Suddenly, ah a man (1.196) came to her and um (430) steal (683) the bag of the girl

Examples (2): Pauses at clause boundaries:

(S 17) She looked very sad. (802)

(S 10) There's a man is sitting next to her (635). He was reading (742)

Mean length of silent pauses per minute

Generally speaking, native and non-native speech contains silent pauses. However, the non-native speech is remarkable of the length of the pauses. With regards to pauses, Chambers (1997, p. 538) states that "even though pauses in interaction are normal features in verbal encounters common to all languages, the presence of silences are often seen as a sign of dysfluency, especially in foreign language speech." Figure 2 below shows the mean length of silent pauses above 0.25 for each speaker of the present study.

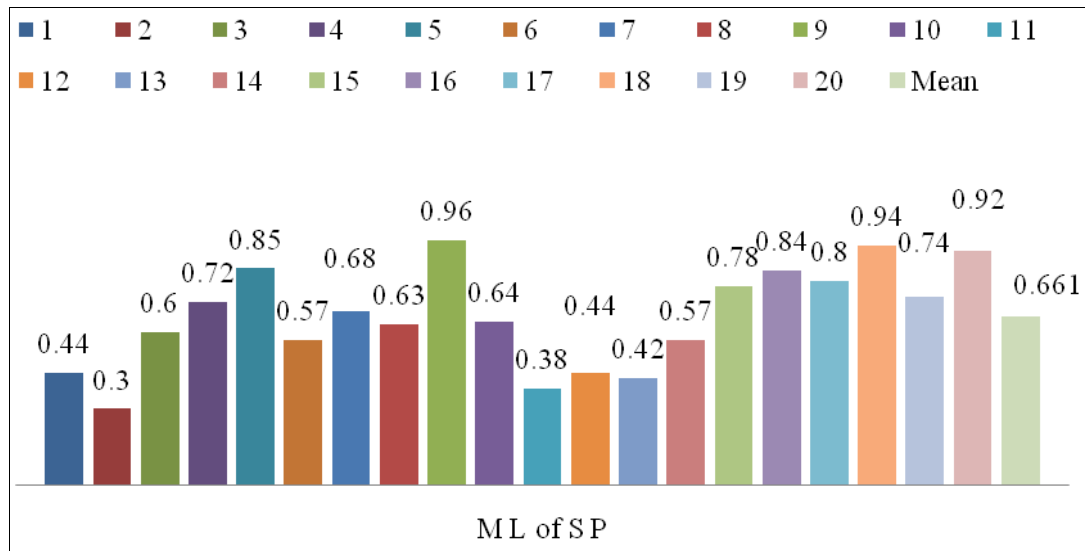


Figure 2. The Participants' Mean Length of Silent Pauses

In the present study, as seen in Figure 2 above, the mean length of silent pauses per minute above 0.25 was 0.66 seconds which is consistent with previous studies investigating this point. For instance, the advanced learners in Kormos and Denes' 2004 study made silent pauses of an average of 615 milliseconds long (0.61 seconds) and the advanced group studied by Stockdale, (2009) paused silently for an average of 69 milliseconds (0.69 seconds). Therefore, added to the frequent pauses at non-clause boundary, speech of the EFL learners at Taiz University sounds disfluent due to the presence of the long silent pauses.

5. Findings

The results of the quantitative analyses suggested that the EFL learners at Taiz University generally overuse silent pauses. Moreover, they pause frequently in the middle of clauses rather than at the end. The placement of the non-fluent pauses longer than 0.25 seconds was 29.4% at clause boundaries while 72.5% were used in the middle of the clauses. The total number of silent pauses was 33.75 silent pauses per minute. In addition, the mean length of the pause was 0.66 seconds. Such findings revealed that the Taiz University EFL learners' speech is characterized by a high number of clause internal pauses which give an impression of non-fluent speech. It appears clearly that the speakers have used pauses in order to gain time for preparation or for recalling words and sentences during their performance. The high frequency as well as the length of the silent pauses also provided an evidence of the low level of fluency obtained by the EFL learners at Taiz University.

6. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to investigate an important temporal variable of speaking fluency which is highly related to the speaking fluency assessment. The results showed that the speech made by the EFL learners at Taiz University is non-fluent due to the pausing; the frequency, the placement as well as the length. Therefore, it is suggested that, for the learners who frequently use non-fluent in-clause pauses in their speech production, a use of repetitive exercises and drills would be a good solution. Generally speaking, repetitions and drills which were popular techniques for the Audio-Lingual method focus on accuracy more than fluency. However, they are supposed to have a good

effect on students overall speaking fluency in the sense that they help learners avoid in-clause pausing. This is confirmed by Jong (2011), who hypothesizes that task repetition can lead to proceduralization, which in turn leads to better fluency.

One of the main findings of this study was the frequent presence of the silent pauses in the production of the EFL learners. Using formulaic sequences is suitable in the training of EFL learners to overcome such factor. Wray defines a formulaic sequence as “ a sequence, continuous or discontinuous of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated; that is stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use”. In studying how formulaic sequences affects the speaking fluency of the learners of English, Wood (2004) found that speech fluency development of language learners is related to and facilitated by the use of formulaic language. The reason is that the formulaic sequences are lexical units that are mostly stored in the brain as single units. Tavakoli (2010) also emphasises that formulaic sequences contain very few pauses and facilitate the learners’ fluency. Phrases like Thank you so much, As a matter of fact, Ladies and gentlemen, I think that..., I agree with the idea that..., May I have your attention?, I shall never forget when... and I have been thinking of, What time do you... can be taken as examples of formulaic sequences.

References

- Boersma, P. & Weenink, D. (2007). Praat: doing phonetics by computer. [A computer program]. Retrieved: November 13, 2014 from <http://www.praat.org/>
- Bosker, H. (2014). The processing and evaluation of fluency in native and non-native speech. University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics.
- Bulc, T.; Hadzi, V. & Horga, D. (2010). Speech fluency, a result of oral language proficiency? University of Ljubljana. 87-100
- Chambers, F. 1997. ‘What do we mean by fluency?’. *System*, 25:4. pp. 535-544
- Cenoz, J. (1998). Pauses and communication strategies in second language speech. In Lindblad, M. (2011). Communication strategies in speaking English as a foreign language in the Swedish 9th grade national test setting. Retrieved from <http://www.divaportal.org/fulltext01.pdf?ved=0ahUKEwjz65Chzlxuahwh1bokhfj-a-8QFggbMAA&usq=AFQJCNgy3lqFdKtgVQu4P1OA-UTghWnoaQ>
- Cucchiari, C., Strik, H. & Boves, L. (2002). Quantitative assessment of second language learners’ fluency by means of automatic speech recognition technology. Art Department of Language and Speech, University of Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9103, 6500HD Nijmegen: The Netherlands .
- De Bot, K. (1992). A bilingual production model: Levelt's speaking model adapted. *Applied Linguistics*, 13(1). In Bosker, H. (2014). The processing and evaluation of fluency in native and non-native speech. Nijmegen, The Netherlands: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics
- Freed, B. (1995). What makes us think that students who study abroad become fluent? In Wood, D. (2010). Formulaic language and second language speech fluency: Background, evidence and classroom applications. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

- Hilton, H (2008). The link between vocabulary knowledge and spoken L2 fluency. *The Language Learning Journal*. (36).
- Jong, D. & Perfetti, C. (2011). Fluency training in the ESL classroom: An experimental study of fluency development and proceduralization. *A Journal of Research in Language studies*.(61).
- Jong, D. & Wempe, T. (2009). Praat script to detect syllable nuclei and measure speech rate automatically. The Psychonomic Society, Inc. University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands and Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands. Pp. 385-390.
- Kormos, J. & Dénes, M. (2004). Exploring measures and perceptions of fluency in the speech of second language learners. *An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics*. Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest System (32). 145–164
- Kormos, J. (2006). *Speech production and second language acquisition*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Levelt, W. J. M. (1989). *Speaking: From intention to articulation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Little, D., Oehmen, R. Dunn , J., Hird, K. and Kirsner, K. (2012). *Fluency Profiling System: An automated analysis of the temporal properties of speech*. Retrieved from: <http://www.psych.unimelb.edu.au/research/labs/knowlab/> September, 2014.
- Segalowitz, N. (2010). *Cognitive bases of second language fluency*. New York: Routledge.
- Stockdale, A. (2009). *Comparing perception of oral fluency to objective measures in the EFL classroom. An MA thesis in Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language (TEFL/TESL)*. Centre for English Language Studies. Department of English. University of Birmingham. Edgbaston, Birmingham. United Kingdom.
- .Tavakoli, P. (2010). *Pausing patterns: differences between L2 learners and native speakers*. *ELT Journal* Volume (65). Published by Oxford University Press. Retrieved from: <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/>.
- Thakur, D. (2009). *Linguistics simplified: Syntax*. New Delhi: Bharati Bhawan.
- Towell, R., Hawkins, R., & Bazergui, N. (1996). The development of fluency in advanced learners of French. *Applied Linguistics*. (17). 84-11.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, D. (2004). *An empirical investigation into the facilitating role of automatized lexical phrases in second language fluency development*. Naruto University of Education, Japan and Carleton University, Canada. *Journal of Language and Learning*. (2)