

Developing LEP Oral Fluency with a Dialogue Template

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Abstract

Dialogue template (DT) is a fluency tool, conceptualized based on chunking and template theories to aid limited English proficiency (LEP) learners in their fluency practice. This article shares findings of learners' gain scores on their speech rate (SR) and average length of pause (ALP) after a month of instructional intervention. Qualitative analyses found teacher's observation and participants' responses converged in three aspects of DT efficacy: SR improvement, chunks-assisted practice and sense of confidence. Findings are discussed in relation to its practical implications in the classroom as well as beyond the study, particularly on chunks analysis, pausing phenomena and alternative fluency tool.

Keywords: Dialogue template; oral fluency; speech rate and pause

Abstrak

Rangka dialog (DT) merupakan satu alat bantu kefasihan lisan berdasarkan teori gugusan perkataan (chunking) dan rangka untuk membantu pelajar yang mempunyai kefasihan yang rendah dalam latihan oralnya. Artikel ini berkongsi dapatan daripada perolehan kamajuan skor dari segi pertuturan (SR) dan purata panjang sejenak (ALP) selepas intervensi pengajaran selama sebulan. Analisis kualitatif mendapati bahawa pemerhatian guru dan respon peserta bertumpu kepada 3 aspek keberkesanan DT: peningkatan pertuturan (SR), gugusan perkataan (chunks) yang membantu latihan dan keyakinan diri. Dapatan kajian dibincangkan sehubungan dengan implikasi praktikal di dalam kelas dan juga melangkaui kajian, terutamanya analisis gugusan perkataan, fenomena berhenti sejenak (pause) dan alat bantu alternative untuk kefasihan.

Kata kunci: Rangka dialog; kefasihan oral; pertuturan dan berhenti sejenak

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Among the four language skills, speaking may be the most daunting to many limited English proficiency (LEP) learners. Speakers have to select and choose between 30,000 and 60,000 words' alternative while carefully infusing a plethora of grammatical structures to the utterances with 0.1 per cent room for errors (Owens, 2008). This heavy cognitive processing is simultaneously challenged with the need for the speakers to articulate their intended meaning as well as comprehending and responding to their interlocutors in real time. In ELT classroom, it is normally a difficult task to ask these learners to speak as they feel inferior in using the language out of fear for committing language errors or being subjected to ridicule by their peers, especially if their peers are perceived as more proficient than them. This is further aggravated with the lack of monitoring devices to chart learners' progress in oral skills even when learners are supplied with scripted speech prior to oral practice. Monitoring devices refer to any software, virtual assessment through websites, audio-video equipment and checklist

of speech criteria that can monitor learners' progress in speaking. Ideally, the devices should be able to record, analyze and provide accurate assessment of the learners' level of proficiency while practicing oral skills and subsequently chart their progress. However, these devices are rarely available or accessible perhaps due to financial constraints on the part of learners and education system as a whole. In contrast to reading and writing whereby learners are able to see their progress based on the answer schemes or marks given after each practice, oral skills require more discrete and meticulous assessment which involves real-time processing from both the speaker and the listener. It is not possible for learners to do it independently for they need another interlocutor that might help gauge their performance and proficiency. In addition, it is difficult to get them to practice for oral skills do not leave visible trace and progress (Richards, 2008), unlike reading and writing. Improvement in these skills is easily reflected from their obtained scores through repeated exercises in the classroom as well as homework given. Apart from that, oral development rarely leaves tangible impression on the speakers' ability on paper as easily as

writing and reading skills. Luoma (2004) observes that 'expecting test scores to be accurate, just and appropriate' (p.1) in assessing speaking is a tall order as there are many factors that influence the impression of how well someone speak. Learners might also feel frustrated as they do not know where they stand in terms of their proficiency level when it comes to oral skills as test scores can differ depending on the context, topic and emotional state of the speakers at the time of assessment.

Pedagogically, teachers aim for accuracy (form-focused), fluency (meaning-focused) and complexity (meaning and form – focused) in their teaching of speaking skills. However, one feature may triumph over the other in the classroom due to many factors such as learners' proficiency and readiness, prioritization of sub skills, limited time to focus on each learner's oral performance and inadequate structural guidance in practice. Some argue that as long as the learners are speaking, they are practicing the language. Yet, it may not translate to their ability to use it proficiently and equally well in all three components of speaking. Accuracy may have been propagated as the basis for speaking pedagogy while complexity is viewed as the pinnacle of oral proficiency but the norm normally favours fluency practice, particularly in communicative language teaching (CLT) environment which focuses on meaning rather than form.

Why Fluency?

Learners are normally deemed fluent when they are able to produce words to convey messages that are understood by their interlocutors. Fluency is usually associated with a few features that relate specifically to the manner of speakers' oral production (i.e. pausing, hesitation, speech rate, length of utterances). These measures sound laborious to teachers and more so to learners but gauging fluency normally includes word count where learners' uttered words are counted in seconds or minutes. Also known as speech rate (SR), most teachers are able to observe this measure in their classroom. Though fluent speakers may or may not compromise their intended meaning with the interference of accuracy and to a certain extent, complexity, most studies used SR as an indication of learners' fluency. Besides SR, average length of pause (ALP) is another common temporal variable of fluency as pausing is easily detected even for untrained listeners. These variables – SR and ALP - had been used in various studies and most learners or listeners almost always associate fluency with these. Even naïve listeners were able to associate fluency with these distinct variables as Freed *et al.* (2004) reported that through an informal survey, first year-undergraduate students defined 'fluency' as "speaking quickly and smoothly", "speaking without saying um, without hesitation" and "richness in vocabulary" (p. 277).

Hypothetically, learners engage first with fluent processing and only subsequently they incorporate accuracy to their fluent repertoire (Bygate, 2001). Bygate's view echoes second language acquisition (SLA) theory whereby children learn language not by knowing all the rules but by getting their messages across first. Normal children usually make conscious effort to articulate what they want even without grammatical knowledge. Despite perhaps obvious grammatical errors, children are seldom corrected and their intention is usually understood by children and adult alike. In retrospect, it may be assumed that children develop their fluency first before advancing into other sub-skills (accuracy and complexity) of speaking. This reflects Comprehensible Output Hypothesis proposed by Swain (1985) who advocates that fluency is developed through constant practice. Practicing fluency is an interactive process; it takes another person to respond to one's speech. Though monologue may be a form of practice, it lacks social input that might improve one's fluency. Vygotsky (1986)

theorizes language learning as a process of interaction in which a learner's level of potential development is cultivated in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) with the help of a teacher and more capable peers. The teacher is required to direct learners' attention to language features until they can perform a given task on their own. In view of fluency practice, learners need specific direction from their teacher and sufficient support from their peers in order to focus on available strategy to develop this skill. Though teachers are able to direct learners' attention to fluency, learners are rarely provided with learner-friendly fluency tools as the assumption is as long as learners are practicing speaking, fluency is developed when in reality, it does not necessarily translate to fluency development. Thus, dialogue template (DT) was conceptualized to aid learners with their fluency practice.

Dialogue Template

Dialogue template (DT) is a fluency tool, specifically designed for the purpose of scaffolding LEP learners' fluency in fulfilling two tasks – individual presentation and group discussion. DT (Appendix A) is a coined term based on the nature of two tasks (monologic and dialogic) that are slotted within a template. These two task types were chosen and integrated as template for they represent most research on fluency task type. Most oral tests require learners to present their opinion and engage in an interview or discussion which indirectly indicate learners' communicative needs in and outside classroom. As such, chunking theory (Servan-Schreiber & Anderson, 1990) was incorporated within the template theory (Gobet & Simon, 1996) to form an A4 size DT that was used as a fluency tool for speaking practice.

Chunking or chunks may come under different terms such as 'memorized sentences', 'lexical stems', 'micro units', 'formulaic expressions' and it ranges between items such as compound nouns like 'mother tongue' and extended lexicalized stems such as 'it's really hard to understand' (Leedham, 2006: p.2). Gobet *et al.* (2001) extend the definition further by categorizing chunking into two processes: 'a deliberate, conscious control of the chunking process (*goal-oriented chunking*) and an automatic and continuous process of chunking during perception (*perceptual chunking*)' (p.28: original emphasis). This study employed perceptual chunking to DT because it encourages the acquisition of fluency skills in which learners' attention can be directed to the key features of the materials to learn.). The language chunks which were strategically placed in DT refer to Lewis (1997) classification of chunks that are known as sentence frames and head or in this study, this refers to 'starter chunks'. These chunks are normally used to structure and aid oral individual presentation and discussion which include 'In my opinion', 'I think', 'I agree', 'My first reason is' and 'In conclusion'.

Apart from employing chunking theory, DT was conceptualised from the knowledge of template theory by Gobet and Simon (1996). A research by Gobet and Jackson (2002) managed to find the link between chunking and template and seemed to have found evidence that template exists in human participants. The researchers believe that (all emphasis is in the original):

'The most important improvement over the chunking theory is the presence of templates, which are larger and more sophisticated forms of retrieval structure than chunks. Like traditional schemas in cognitive science, templates have a *core* that remains unchanged, and a set of *slots*, perhaps with defaults values, whose value can be rapidly altered.' (Gobet & Jackson, 2002: p.36)

Template may be perceived as fixed and lack variety or even to a certain extent, hamper creativity but a study by Schmitt (2005)

found that many cases of chunks contain considerable amount of variation. This variation in chunks was encouraged in the fluency practice while DT was in use.

DT starts with two horizontal spaces for ‘topic’ and ‘useful language chunks’. These spaces were filled in during the brainstorming phase in the fluency session of the teaching format. Two columns with headings ‘Individual Presentation Template’ and ‘Group Discussion Template’ were placed directly below the spaces. Each column had starter chunks with guided slots for learners to fill in during brainstorming phase of fluency practice.

Topic:	
Useful language chunks:	
<p><u>Individual Presentation Template</u></p> <p>1) Good morning everyone.</p> <p>2) In my opinion/ I think/ I believe/ I agree/ I disagree that</p> <p><u>[State your opinion here]</u></p>	<p><u>Group Discussion Template</u></p> <p>Initiator/starter: What do you think of/ Do you agree that <u>[state the topic]</u></p> <p>In agreement: I agree that <u>[topic]</u> because <u>[state two reasons]</u></p>

Figure 1 A sample of DT

With the conceptualisation and production of DT completed, the objectives of the study are (a) to determine whether there is a significant gain in LEP learners’ speech rate (SR) and average length of pauses (ALP) after DT use and (b) to find out the effectiveness of DT in developing their oral fluency.

2.0 THE STUDY

A quasi-experimental research was conducted on two groups of learners with similar characteristics. These characteristics were operationalized in terms of participants’ age (19 years old), level of English proficiency (extremely limited or limited user of English), formal exposure to English in primary and secondary school (eleven years) and academic streaming (art stream).

Prior to instructional intervention, both groups were subjected to pretest as oral fluency gain for speech rate (SR) and average length of pauses (ALP) was determined by subtracting the pretest score from the post test score. SR was computed as words per second. Words were used instead of syllables as most Malaysian ESL learners (participants in the study) tend to pronounce words as it is spelled. For example, some beginner learners pronounce the word ‘lettuce’ (two syllables) as ‘let-tu-ce’ (three syllables). As for ALP, it was calculated by dividing the total length of pause time (both silent and filled) by the total number of pauses. Filled pauses include repeated words, self repairs and words like ‘well’, ‘er’, ‘um’, ‘ah’, ‘and’. Both pre and post tests were conducted in groups of three or four that resembled MUET (Malaysian University English Test) speaking test whereby participants were required to provide responses both to individual presentation and group

discussion. MUET is an English proficiency test, administered to tertiary level students, which assess their language competency in listening, speaking, reading and writing

Speech samples which had been recorded in both pre and posttest were then transferred to PRAAT, a speech analysis software programme that converts sound files into a three dimensional spectrogram. This software facilitates transcription and analysis of a very small segment of recorded speech. This software was used in a few studies (Blake, 2006; Trofimovich & Baker, 2006; Deterding, 2001) and evidently, it was able to measure all temporal variables intended for this study. In addition, the software is free as it can be downloaded from the internet. The website (www.praat.com) also provides a list of active PRAAT users in a Yahoo group whereby problems and solutions pertaining to the software application are actively discussed by various academic users around the world

For instructional intervention, each group was assigned to different fluency treatment for four weeks, with two sessions (80 minutes) per week. Experimental group used DT in their fluency practice while the control group was not given access to DT. The teacher teaching the control group did not use DT at all while the teacher teaching the experimental group was supplied with an A4 laminated DT that could fit into learners’ hands. As both groups were taught by the same teacher, an observation scheme was supplied so as to control the quality of teaching as well as to curb ‘teaching bias’ and treatment transfer. For the duration of the whole instructional intervention, the teacher was prescribed a teaching format with two main topics and four subtopics which were carried out concurrently for both groups. Topic 1 was on socio-cultural issues while Topic 2 was on science and technology.

During fluency session for DT group, the teacher first elicited learners’ response to simple open-ended questions such as “How was your holiday?” in the pre-fluency phase. Then, the teacher proceeded to brainstorming phase where learners were encouraged to offer as many language chunks (words, expressions or simple sentences) as possible which were closely related to the topic for that particular session. The teacher wrote the chunks on the blackboard and elicited learners understanding of each chunks. Learner would later attempt to use the chunks when they were asked to give a few examples in the classroom. The teacher made constructive comments and corrections where necessary. In fluency phase, the teacher demonstrated on how some chunks previously brainstormed could be fitted into DT. Learners practiced their fluency with DT and presented their speech to the class.

Interview was later conducted with the participants in DT group upon completion of the post test at the end of instructional intervention. Five questions were posed to the participants that concerned with their self-evaluation of fluency in relation to DT use, evaluation of specific components of fluency as well as their comments and suggestions on DT. The responses for each question were analyzed and coded into categories.

Is There a Significant Gain in LEP Learners’ Speech Rate After DT Use?

It was found that the group using DT performed higher speech rate ($M = .31$, $SD = .28$) than the group that did not use DT ($M = .03$, $SD = .21$). This difference was significant, $t(18) = 1.85$, $p < .05$, $d = .61$. Despite its small sample size, Cohen’s d value indicates that there was a relatively medium treatment effect. Hence, the statistical value obtained by the DT group on this measure support the notion that oral fluency improvement may be possible with the aid of DT. The increased gain scores in speech rate by DT group could be attributed to two reasons. Firstly, the practice and use of DT chunks might accelerate automaticity which subsequently led to speedy processing of speech production and secondly, appropriately

selected topics may offer more opportunity for participants to speak.

DT chunks could be one of the possible reasons that DT group performed significantly better than the control group. There were twenty starter chunks provided in DT such as ‘In my opinion’, ‘I think’ and ‘Firstly’. These could have been internalized through practice and might have successfully led to automaticity. In fact, the results signify that learning chunks through organized practice increase production in speed and fluency and consequently, lead to great improvement in L2 fluency (Carter, 2004). This also lends support to Segalowitz’s (2003) theory on automaticity which claims that learners are able to retrieve readymade chunks and phrases without much effort after sufficient practice and skills strengthening. As automaticity is normally associated with speed of processing, it has become one of the hallmark characteristics of an automatic process. Therefore, it may be possible that as processing time lessens, participants in DT group were able to use more chunks to fill in the ‘pause’ void and this might indirectly contribute to the obvious effect on their speech rate gain scores.

The result can also be seen as illustrating De Bot’s Bilingual Production Model (1992) that theorizes the most significant process in fluency performance is at the formulation stage. This stage is crucial in speech production of L2 learners as the speakers need to access appropriate lemmas (meaning of words) and lexemes (representation of words) during speaking. This may steal precious processing time from the speakers should the lemmas and lexemes are not readily stored in the formulator stage while speaking. In this study, participants in DT group had been given starter chunks as well as some practice on brainstormed chunks during fluency practice. As a result, they were able to retrieve and use some of the chunks stored for post test and consequently, it reduced their cognitive burden and indirectly increased their speech rate for time was not wasted on searching for words.

Derwing et. al. (2004) claim that speech rate is easily identified in speech samples and is usually associated with speakers’ fluent speech. It would be far-fetched to assume that the participants in this study had become fluent based on the results of their speech rate in just four weeks. However, it might also be possible that DT participants managed to utilize some of the DT chunks learned during fluency practice to the post test and this reduced their processing time in answering the questions which led to the increase gain in SR measure.

Is There a Significant Gain in LEP Learners’ Average Length of Pauses (ALP) After DT Use?

There was no significant gain found to support this hypothesis. Despite the per cent gain made by the DT group in Table 1 and Figure 2, it was not that large of a difference as DT group only outweighed control group by 0.89 per cent. It shows that DT group improved on an average of .35 seconds per pause from their pretest (1.36 seconds per pause) and post test (1.01 seconds per pause).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for the results on average length of pause (ALP) measure

Variable	Pretest			Post test			Gain		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	M	SD	%
Control	9	1.23	.96	9	.93	.38	.30	.70	14.05
DT	11	1.36	.79	11	1.01	.26	.35	.61	14.94

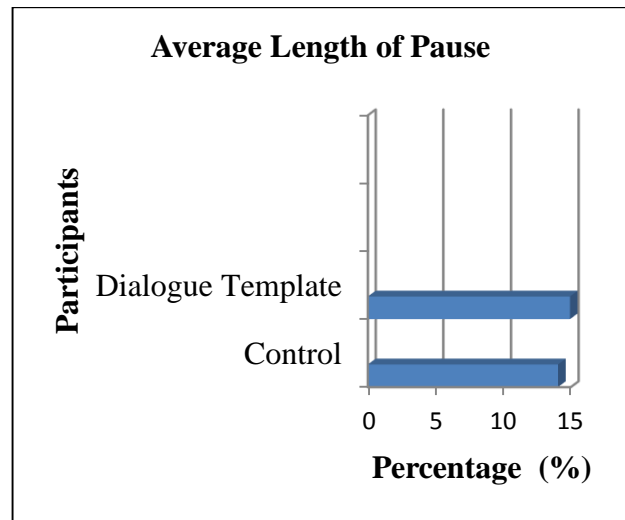


Figure 2 Per cent increase from pretest to posttest for each group on the average length of pause measure

Largest gain scores were made on ALP measure with the two groups reflecting a combined average gain of 29 per cent. However, it also shows an average decrease for both groups. This outcome was expected as the negative gain scores are inversely correlated with fluency. Smaller scores indicate shorter length of pauses and these are usually translated to higher performance on fluency. This unexpected finding could be attributed to two reasons which pertain to teaching focus and habitual pausing style.

The fact that the DT group did not show gains that were statistically different may have resulted from the lack of teaching focus on pausing in the teaching format. The teaching format had solely focused on lexical acquisition (either by chunks or words) to ensure that the participants from both groups perform well for their tests. However, this might have caused the teacher and the learners to sideline the importance of pausing. Van Loon (2002) theorizes that pauses might contribute to natural flow of speech in proficient learners whereas for less proficient learners, it may impede fluency and listeners’ comprehension. Perhaps if pausing was to be integrated as one of the teaching points in the teaching format, DT participants would have performed significantly better.

Another possible reason for the results could be due to participants’ pausing style. Pausing style refers to speakers’ automatic use of either filled or unfilled pause to fill in the void between speech runs. It may also indicate that the length of pause for participants may show only minimal changes for it has been ingrained in their speech production. There were some distinct patterns among participants in DT group related to pausing. The same pausing styles were also present in control group but as the discussion is mainly on DT insignificant gain in this measure, hence, Figure 3 shows the segmented transcript’s run of three participants from the DT group. The pause (either filled or unfilled pause) is located in between speech runs (shaded segments). The time in seconds is also given at the bottom of each pause.

Participant E1

Er	um	er		er
1.28	1.10	1.44	1.57	.99

Participant E3

	um			
1.58	1.51	1.06	.55	.75

Participant E11

			can		that		er	
.38		.41	.82		.50		.90	

Figure 3 Pausing styles of DT participants in transcript run

Based on Figure 3, it seems that the length of pause did not differ much in Participant E1 as it ranged between 1.57 seconds and .99 seconds. Most importantly, E1 mostly used filled pauses such as ‘er’ or ‘um’ in between speech runs. However, Participant E5 only had one filled pause (‘um’) while the rest of pauses were not filled. The length of pause also indicates that it did not vary much. Participant E11, on the other hand, used filled pauses but instead of ‘er’ or ‘um’, the participant was prone to repeat the words. E11’s length of pause was also near consistent as it did not exceed 1 second mark. This might explain the fact that DT group did not make significant gain in the statistical analysis for pausing style as it would require more than four weeks to be changed and improved. In addition, the participants’ attention would also need to be directed to the pauses made during speech production. It could also mean that pauses do not contribute much to the measurement for fluency as Lennon (2002) noted that fluency entails more than being able to speak with few pauses. In fact, this study shared similar results with Blake (2006) who did not see significant difference in gain scores obtained through the analysis of average length of pause.

How Effective is DT in Developing Oral Fluency in LEP Learners?

The teacher’s observation and participants’ responses to the interview questions were analyzed and converged into emerging themes which show the extent of DT’s effectiveness in developing LEP learners’ oral fluency. Participants’ responses were mostly short due to their limited proficiency but it offers valuable insights in creating a rounded view of the tool’s efficacy.

1. Observable Improvement on SR

One interesting finding from the teacher observation scheme was she believed that the participants’ speech rate had improved when DT was used. This was the only statement that she ticked in six out of eight sessions after it ended. Although the teacher in this study was not exposed to the method in calculating speech rate of the participants, she was able to spot the improvement made in that measure. Her observation also corresponded with the quantitative findings as well as learners’ perception on improvement made. More than half of the participants in DT group believed that they had made some improvement in fluency (operationalized in SR context):

- “I think I have improved a little bit.” [E2, E3, E5]
 “A bit of improvement in fluency” [E6, E7, E9, E11]
 “I think my fluency improved” [E4, E10]

The participants’ ability to detect their own improvement is consistent with findings from Stillwell *et al* (2010) on fluency in which learners were able to monitor their development through word counting of their own transcriptions. In this study, although only two participants felt their fluency was not improving, it did not affect the statistical analysis of the quantitative data for these two participants did make some improvement in SR. Their responses could have originated from their own unawareness of progress made. Perhaps in depth interview would have been fruitful to probe further on why these learners felt that way. However, due

to limited time available and their involvement with school events, this was not pursued.

Although the teacher was able to detect improvement in SR, the same could not be said for ALP. The teacher believed that there was no improvement in terms of pausing after DT use. The statistical analysis of ALP had also not found any significant difference in this measure. Probably the teacher was not focusing on the length of pause as the priority lay in lexical acquisition. Another possible reason could be due to the use of filled pause whereby the teacher might not be able to detect it. In fact, Van Loon (2002) mentioned that pausing can be a strategy used in speech production as even native speakers pause to think.

2. Language Chunks Assist Idea Flow

The teacher also recognised that language chunks (provided in DT and brainstorming phase) assisted DT group in their fluency practice. She observed gradual adaptation to DT and chunks by the participants as well as its increasing effect on their fluency.

‘Students were more adjusted to the DT. The chunks help them to participate more, though some of them are structurally off at times’

Session 2

It is also worth noting that the teacher mentioned that some of the chunks were structurally incorrect. At this juncture, it might be possible that the participants were illustrating De Bot’s bilingual production model (1992) whereby L2 fluency is mainly processed in the formulator level. Hence, cognitive processes need to be reinforced at this level through frequent face-to-face language activities since learners are engaged in this process prior to the articulation stage. In view of bilingual speech processing model, ESL learners are seen to be overwhelmed with simultaneous processes of *conceptualizing, formulating, articulating and self-monitoring* while trying to hold conversations in real time. As such, learners’ working memory, which functions to ‘extracts and temporarily stores information from both the input and long term memory’ (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005: p. 141), is taxed with these complex processes. When learners’ working memory is overloaded and overburden by extracting input and activating second language knowledge, message content and linguistic form are not fully accessible because learners will have to prioritize one over the other, depending on the context and orientation. Therefore, learners tend to simplify their working memory by either focusing on meaning or syntax especially in online production and as such, may have contributed to DT participants’ structurally incorrect speech production.

In addition, it may also suggest how Skehan’s exemplar-based system (1998) on chunks works. The system operates on large number of formulaic chunks of various shapes and sizes which are sometimes referred to as ‘chunks’, ‘composites’, ‘fixed expressions’, ‘formulaic language’, ‘frozen phrases’, ‘idioms’, ‘lexicalized sentence stems’, ‘prefabricated routines’ and ‘patterns and stock utterance’ (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005: p. 142). This system is important to learners for it conserves precious processing resources as these chunks can be accessed rapidly and relatively effortlessly. Based on the teacher’s reflection, it suggests that the participants may have to prioritize between chunks and syntax during speech production and therefore, jeopardized the grammatical properties of the chunks.

Participants’ responses to DT contents also mirrored their teacher’s observation on the role of chunks in fluency practice. More than half of the participants in DT group believed that starter chunks helped them during fluency practice.

“The chunks we brainstorm help during speaking.” [E5]
 “We practice the chunks before speaking. It helps to prepare points.” [E7]
 “The points and chunks given before practice help me speak more.” [E9]

Furthermore, half of the DT group mentioned that they could give ideas easily with a few of them mentioned that they had more points to say.

“Now, it is easy to give ideas” [E4, E5, E6]
 “I can give ideas easily” [E11]
 “After using DT, it is easy to give ideas” [E3]

Prior to DT use, these learners may have ideas but they might not be able to extend it. However, with starter and brainstormed chunks provided, they may have extra lexical knowledge that they can put to use. Previously, they had to think carefully before presenting their points but now when the chunks were given centre stage in teaching it became an automatic processing and as such made it easy for them to give ideas. Not only these chunks helped in lessening cognitive processing time, it also structured their thoughts and ideas.

The last question of the interview required participants to state their comments and suggestions regarding the use of DT. One third of the respondents wanted more chunks in DT which indicate that they might have realized the value of DT in improving their fluency.

“There should be more chunks.” [E7]
 “We need more language chunks to practice in DT.” [E10]

These responses could mean either (a) the chunks in the template restrict their ability to produce phrases beyond the variety given or (b) they want more chunks that are tailored to specific fluency contexts. Interestingly, participants were able to produce variety of the starter chunks given in the post test as shown in Table 2. This indicates that even when these learners were of limited proficiency, they were able to tweak the chunks to suit the context of speaking.

Table 2 Chunk variation from participants’ speech sample

<i>Provided chunks</i>	<i>Variation of chunks</i>	<i>Participants’ Code</i>
In my opinion	For my opinion	E10
	My point is	E4 and E11
I agree	I also agree	E3
	I strongly agree	E6
I disagree	I totally disagree	E10
	I don’t agree	E7
What do you think?	How about you?	E3 and E6
	What about you?	E4 and E11
	What about your opinion?	E5
May I interrupt?	Can I interrupt?	E3
I am sorry to interrupt	Sorry to interrupt your ideas.	E3

3. Confidence in Delivery

The final reflection of the teacher reveals the effect of DT after eight sessions of fluency practice.

‘At the end of the session (8 in total), students have become more confident when presenting. They seem to enjoy the sessions more too.’

The participants’ confidence in speaking developed as confirmed by the teacher in the last reflection. The teacher noted that the students had gained confidence in presenting. The word confidence is subjective and may lead to different interpretation. However, in this context, the teacher’s judgment on the participants’ confidence level is substantiated as the teacher has been teaching them for more than a year. In this respect, it would be safe to assume that the learners had gained confidence based on the teacher’s perspective and qualified judgment. In addition, she also mentioned that the learners enjoyed the session more as they were getting used to DT. Based on the teacher’s observation, DT may be viewed as confidence-booster and this may have a direct effect on their improvement in fluency.

Corroborating the teacher’s observation, nearly half of the DT group mentioned that the structured steps in DT helped them in their practice. Their responses were projection of their growing confidence in using DT while delivering their speeches in the classroom.

“The steps like greetings, introduction, content and conclusion help in speaking” [E11]
 “My thoughts or ideas are not so messed up when I use DT. It has steps I can follow” [E10]
 “Systematic. Organized. Just follow the steps and ideas will come” [E3]
 “Steps are given. Makes it easier to give ideas” [E2]

Though confidence is a subjective measurement, the teacher’s reflection and the participants’ responses offer insights into what they think and feel with DT use. There may not be substantiated link between level of confidence and fluency gain of the learners in this study but it did help in catalysing their development in fluency.

Practical Implications on Fluency Practice

A single study such as this may not provide a sound basis for classroom practice on fluency, but it suggests a revision on practice that benefit not only the majority of ESL learners (who are mostly considered as intermediate learners) but also LEP learners. Age should not be the benchmark to classify learners according to their proficiency as many studies have indicated that learners’ age may not directly illustrate their level of proficiency. Participants in this study, for example, were 19 years old but their proficiency did not match those of even the intermediate level. Therefore, the teaching of fluency to LEP learners should take into consideration their affective domains, such as their interest, attitude and psychological factors as well as potential fluency tools that may assist their fluency development. In fact, it might be a mistake to adopt a ‘blanket’ approach to teaching fluency as most learners do not possess the same level of proficiency in the same classroom.

Previously, some research indicated that LEP learners shared a similar level of fluency. However, Ranta and Derwing (2000) as well as this study have shown different results in which there were significant differences in the fluency level. These results are crucial for most of the time, LEP learners have been sidelined in empirical research, particularly those related to fluency. It implies that with appropriate fluency tools and the timely shift in lexical learning, beginner learners could improve on their fluency. First and foremost, these learners’ attention needs to be directed to the availability of chunks and its use in communicative purpose rather than focusing solely on words. They need to be encouraged to practice producing chunks in their spoken output.

Beyond the Study

Future studies may want to tap on the types of chunks used for fluency practice. The type of chunks used in this study was only on sentence frames and head or known as ‘starter chunks’ (Lewis, 2002). It would be interesting to investigate the effect of other types of chunks proposed by Lewis such as polywords, collocations (word partnerships) and institutionalized utterances. Apart from that, it would also be equally interesting to analyse the chunks used in speech samples of LEP learners. The analysis could try to identify repeated chunks used by these learners in their speech production. The analysis may enrich the findings presented by McCarthy (2006) pertaining to multi-word clusters in spoken English in which he claimed there were visible patterns of interaction. In fact, there seems to be a shift in lexical learning whereby the growth of corpus linguistics ‘has convinced linguists that vocabulary is much more than the unordered list of all lexical formatives’ (McCarthy, 2006: pg. 9). Future studies might want to take the advantage of the growing corpus available, such as the CANCODE (Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English) spoken discourse as the point of departure. By utilizing this lexical knowledge provided in corpora, it may promote faster growth in fluency for the chunks are taken from frequently used chunks, either in spoken or written discourse. In fact, up to 90% - 95% per cent of speech production is composed out of the same 2,000 high frequency word families (Nation, 2001; Adolphs and Schmitt, 2004). Equipped with this knowledge, perhaps effective approach to fluency practice could be tailored, especially to LEP learners.

As the study did not report significant gain in ALP, it is recommended that future studies attempt to compare the role of pause between proficient and less proficient ESL learners. For example, future researchers might want to investigate whether the pause used by both types of learner facilitates or impedes the listeners’ comprehension of their speech production. Apart from that, future studies could also analyse the role of pause in native speakers and compare it to proficient and less proficient L2 learners.

Future researchers may also investigate on the effectiveness of alternative fluency tools. As this study utilized DT, future studies may want to explore other tools that are deemed beneficial for fluency improvement. These alternative tools may be derived from the use of appropriate technology in the classrooms as well as in its simplest form – based on paper. With the advent of applications in smart phones, perhaps a new medium could be explored in creating an interactive fluency tool which could cater to technology savvy and digital age learners. Of late, there are many chatting application which include recording, playback and interactive functions such as WhatsApp, Line, WeChat and ChatOn. These applications are mostly free and used by most learners. Studies on these applications and its effect on learners’ oral skills might offer a different perspective than presented in this study.

3.0 CONCLUSION

Focus on chunks in DT stemmed from the need to reduce cognitive processing in LEP learners in an attempt to produce fluent speakers. The tool, albeit simple to some, has demonstrated that it necessitates easier access to lexical knowledge while practicing speaking. Though the findings of this short study may not be conclusive and maybe a generalization, learners’ responses and the teacher’s reflections suggest that DT is effective in improving learners’ speech rate (SR) and confidence with the help of starter and brainstormed chunks provided. Learners’ gain scores on SR also indicated that DT enriched their fluency practice and as a

result, it was reflected in their post-test performance. It is important to note that despite their low proficiency in the language, results showed that difference in performance was significant. Exploring learners’ development in accuracy and complexity of speaking by using DT helps deepen our understanding on the intertwining relationship in speech production and this would be a fruitful endeavour to those who are researching L2 learning.

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Appendix A
A Sample of Dialogue Template (DT)

Topic:	
Useful language chunks:	
<p><u>Individual Presentation Template</u></p> <p>1) Good morning everyone.</p> <p>2) In my opinion/ I think/ I believe/ I agree / I disagree that <u>[state your opinion here]</u></p> <p>3 i) Firstly, <u>[reason 1]</u>. For example, <u>[example for reason 1]</u> Secondly, <u>[reason 2]</u> and one of the examples is <u>[example for reason 2]</u>.</p> <p>3 ii) My first reason is <u>[reason 1]</u> because <u>[example for reason 1]</u>. My second reason is <u>[reason 2]</u> because <u>[example for reason 2]</u></p> <p>4) In conclusion, I believe that <u>[opinion + 2 reasons stated earlier]</u>.</p> <p>5) Thank you.</p> <hr style="width: 30%; margin-left: 0;"/> <p><i>This is a basic template. You may give more than two (2) reasons and examples.</i></p>	<p><u>Group Discussion Template</u></p> <p>Initiator/starter: What do you think of / Do you agree that/ <u>[state the topic]?</u></p> <p>In agreement: I agree that <u>[topic]</u> because <u>[state 2 reasons]</u>.</p> <p>In disagreement: I do not agree with <u>[topic]</u> because <u>[state 2 reasons]</u>.</p> <p>Interrupter: May I interrupt?/ I am sorry to interrupt but <u>[state your opinion + reasons]</u>.</p> <p>Commentator: I know that/ I can see that/ I wish that <u>[state your opinion]</u>.</p> <p>Concluding: Finally, all of us agree that <u>[state the conclusion]</u></p> <p>Thank you.</p> <hr style="width: 30%; margin-left: 0;"/> <p><i>These are the basic roles in group template. You may use the roles more than once or repeatedly during your discussion.</i></p>