

Fluency

Introduction

The word 'fluency' here refers to the flow of a person's speech. This means how quickly they speak, how often and why they hesitate, and how much silence there is. It considers speakers' ability to construct sentences despite pauses and hesitations, whether they are able to maintain a longer conversation or passage of speech, and how easily words and expressions come to them.

Please note: In the chart, you'll see the measurements of words per minute; you don't need to count this exactly. An average native speaker or very proficient learner speaks at a rate of around 120 words per minute; therefore, by comparison, you can judge whether a person's speech rate is relatively natural or noticeably slower.

You will also see the chart refers to 'turns'; in a conversation, speakers 'take turns', which means that one speaker says something which is "preceded, followed, or both by a 'turn' of some other speaker."⁵

Finally, the chart alludes to times when the speaker 'has the floor'. A speaker takes the floor when they start speaking in a conversation. But they are unlikely to be speaking for 100% of the time they have the floor, because we all need to pause occasionally to plan what's coming next, or to think of a word, for example. So, if someone speaks for around half the time they have the floor, this means that they are silent or pausing to reflect for the other half.

Fluency Scale

Basic User	A1	Can form turns of short, mainly pre-packaged single utterances. Otherwise, sentences are disjointed, with a lot of hesitation and pausing after every couple of words to search for words or expressions or repair communication. They speak for less than half the time they have the floor. These pauses, whether silent or filled (i.e. eh, um), can last for two seconds. Speech rate is very slow, with not usually more than 20 words per minute.
	A2	Can use simple sentences with frequent hesitation, meaning that they speak for less than half the time they have the floor. Pauses can last for two seconds or more.
Independent User	B1	Can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production, where they may hesitate mid-clause to plan what they are going to say next. These hesitations or pauses are usually less than 2 seconds long. They speak for around half the time they have the floor. Speech rate is quite slow, averaging around 50 words per minute.
	B2	Can express themselves more steadily in longer stretches of turns comprised of 2 utterances on subjects they are familiar with. Speech may still be somewhat disjointed with a couple of hesitations per sentence. Pauses are usually less than one second. They speak for more than half of the time they have the floor. In conversation and when telling a story or describing an event, they can usually produce around 6 words before pausing.
Proficient User	C1	Can express themselves spontaneously, speaking for more than half the time they have the floor. Conceptually difficult subjects can trigger more frequent pauses and hesitations, which are usually less than one second long. They speak for more than half of the time they have the floor, averaging 50-75 words per minute. Pauses are usually very natural, occurring at the end of the sentence.
	C2	Can express themselves spontaneously at length with a speech rate of around 120 words per minute, similar to a native speaker. Pauses do not suggest the speaker is repairing or having difficulty finding a word or expression.

Remember: Each level includes and builds on the previous levels.

⁵ Matthews, P.H. 2014. 'turn'. In *The concise Oxford dictionary of linguistics*, 3rd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.