

A Corpus-based Study of Learners' Confluence

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The notion of confluence introduced by McCarthy (2006) is a key concept in understanding and evaluating actual spoken discourse. It is essential to defining *oral fluency*, which cannot be accounted for solely on the basis of purely theoretical, "idealised" (McCarthy, 2006:1) criteria that, although useful, might fail to provide the full picture of this phenomenon. This paper reports on a study whose main purpose was to investigate how *confluence* is used in speaking by advanced Polish students of English. The present paper first explores procedures and limitations of confluence-oriented spoken data collection and discusses the importance of co-operation between speakers during oral examinations and/or recording sessions. Then, it presents typical components of native speakers' confluence as described by McCarthy (2006) -- i.e. back channelling and completing one another's conversational turn -- as well as linguistic devices which were found to be used by students (e.g. inviting a partner to take a conversational turn or completing one another's conversational turn at request). The results reported in the paper are based on the spoken-conversational data component of the Polish English learner corpus (PLEC), which was partly annotated for confluence markers.

The most important findings concern the frequency of certain confluence components with respect to their types. In addition, the frequency of the use of specific lexical and non-lexical items by Polish learners is analysed. It was found, for example, that in order to perform back channelling students show a tendency to use interjections, such as *yes, yeah* over the more natural inserts (in the contexts analysed), such as *uh-huh* or *mhm*. Finally, the study results for Polish students of English are compared with a selected portion of spoken data from the British National Corpus. The results show how Polish students differ from native speakers with regard to the usage of various means of scaffolding one another's performance. We believe that these findings have practical implications for both language teaching and language testing.

References

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