IMPROVING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ENGLISH SPEAKING FLUENCY USING THE 4/3/2 TECHNIQUE

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Abstract:

Improving English fluency is one of the challenges for high school students in Vietnam. The traditional methods of teaching English in their schools are mostly focused on grammar and vocabulary over oral skills. This research is an investigation of the improvement in fluency resulting from the 4/3/2 technique. Specifically, seven weeks were devoted to experimenting with 30 students from grade 11 at Luong Ngoc Quyen High School. Pre-test and post-test designs were employed in this study, measuring the features of fluency through speech rate, pauses, and hesitation. The results have shown that a significant improvement in fluency has been achieved, with scores and positive reactions from the participants. Hence, the 4/3/2 technique could be considered an effective tool in teaching English speaking skills and is recommended for more frequent use.

Keywords: English speaking, speaking fluency, 4/3/2 technique, high school students

1. Introduction

A major concern in English language teaching is the development of learners' speaking fluency as a key component of communicative competence. Despite many years of studying English in formal education, few Vietnamese students are able to communicate confidently in real-life situations. This issue is largely attributed to teaching methods that place excessive emphasis on grammar and vocabulary, while neglecting communicative activities and the cultivation of speaking fluency. Additional factors—such as limited opportunities for authentic communication, fear of making mistakes, and an exam-oriented education system—also contribute to students' underdeveloped speaking skills (Trang & Baldauf, 2007; Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Ngo, 2019).

Research has proven that fluency, which is an individual's ability to speak naturally and quickly, frequently goes ignored in real classroom practice despite its being

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a vital feature of oral communication (Brown, 2007; Nation, 1989). This clearly calls for an innovative approach in the teaching of English with the objective of reducing the gap between students' language knowledge and their ability to use it fluently in conversation. One such method is the 4/3/2 technique, developed by Paul Nation (1989), in which students are tasked to perform a speaking activity in repeated trials, requiring them to do it three times with decreased time given for each repetition. The activity not only helps learners improve their speech rate and reduce hesitation but also raises confidence in students. While it has proven effective in many EFL contexts, its effectiveness in Vietnamese high schools remains to be underexplored.

In today's globalized world, speaking fluency plays an important role, as English proficiency empowers candidates to open up academic, professional, and social opportunities (Bernad & Brindha, 2025; Duan, 2024). The integration of the world economy has necessitated the need for effective English communication in all environments, especially in education and work systems in Vietnam (Yen, 2019; Cao & Dang, 2024; Doan & Hamid, 2021). The way to meet these demands is to integrate strategies promoting fluency in speech into communicative language teaching.

Therefore, the study set out to examine how suitable the use of the 4/3/2 technique would be in a Vietnamese high school context. It not only determines the effectiveness of this technique in improving students' speaking fluency but also explores their attitude towards the technique. This study hopes to offer valuable insights for other educators to consider the integration of more effective, student-centered speaking activities, as well as contribute to the broader efforts in improving English teaching in Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most important yet challenging skills in language learning. It involves the real-time production of spoken language for the purpose of expressing thoughts, emotions, and intentions (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Bygate, 1987). Unlike receptive skills, speaking requires learners to actively process and produce language on the spot, which makes it cognitively demanding (Marzona, 2017). Moreover, it plays a vital role in helping individuals engage in meaningful communication and build relationships in both personal and academic contexts (Marchand *et al.*, 2022; Kuhlen & Abdel Rahman, 2023).

Bygate (1987) describes speaking as the use of language with others, in the spoken mode, in real time, with the intention of conveying or receiving meaning. This definition highlights that speaking is not a passive act but an interactive process where the speaker needs to consider context, audience, and purpose. For example, the way one speaks in a formal presentation differs significantly from how one speaks in a casual conversation. These variations show that speaking is a complex process that requires constant decision-making and the ability to adapt language use based on the situation.

In addition to producing speech, effective speaking requires knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and sociocultural context. Harwood (2010) points out that speaking serves many functions—from giving instructions and making requests

to criticizing or entertaining. Each of these functions demands different linguistic choices. Furthermore, non-verbal elements such as intonation, facial expressions, and gestures also contribute significantly to meaning and help ensure that messages are understood accurately (Khan, Zeb, Batool & Gasiorowska, 2025).

Speaking is not only a linguistic activity but also a socially driven one. It is closely tied to interpersonal communication and plays a key role in shaping one's personal identity (Harwood, 2010). Through speech, individuals do more than convey information—they also express attitudes, emotions, and social roles. The way someone speaks can influence how they are perceived in various settings, from classrooms and workplaces to casual social interactions.

Fluency in speaking has been widely defined in second language acquisition research. According to Richards (2006), fluency refers to the natural and ongoing use of language in meaningful interaction, even when communicative competence is limited. Lennon (in Jamatlou, 2011) adds that fluency involves the rapid, smooth, accurate, and efficient transformation of thoughts into speech under real-time constraints. Segalowitz (2010) further distinguishes three dimensions of fluency: cognitive fluency (mental processing), utterance fluency (observable features such as speed and pauses), and perceived fluency (listener judgment).

Research has identified key indicators of utterance fluency, including speech rate (Ginther *et al.*, 2010), hesitation and pause frequency (Riggenbach, 1991; Park, 2016), and instances of repetition or repair (Schegloff, 2007). While fluency is often confused with speaking quickly, Browne and Fulcher (2017) emphasize that it also involves coherence, accuracy, and minimal disruptions. These frameworks support the rationale for assessing fluency through measurable features such as speech rate, pauses, and hesitation markers, as applied in this study.

The 4/3/2 technique is a structured fluency-building activity in which learners deliver the same monologue three times with decreasing time limits: first in four minutes, then three, and finally two (Nation, 1989). This task design encourages learners to focus on the essential content, promoting clearer, more automatic speech production under time pressure.

The technique is grounded in cognitive load theory and retrieval practice. By limiting time, it reduces the cognitive burden and encourages learners to prioritize key information, facilitating more fluent, semantically focused communication (Nation, 1989; Ericsson *et al.*, 1993; Levelt, 1989). Repeated practice also strengthens procedural knowledge, aiding in faster vocabulary retrieval and syntactic automatization.

Initially introduced by Maurice (1983) as a "timed monologue," the technique has been further developed and supported by researchers such as Nation (1989), Bamford and Day (2004), and De Jong (2012). It aligns with principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), emphasizing real-time communication over structural accuracy (Richards *et al.*, 1992), while also sharing features with the Audio-lingual Method through structured repetition and oral focus (Nunan, 2003). The theoretical foundation for exploring the impact of the 4/3/2 technique in improving sleakung fluency and its application in addressing challenges in students' English speaking fluency proficiency

3. Material and Methods

This study employed a pre-experimental design to fully understand the effect of the 4/3/2 technique on the English speaking fluency of the Grade 11 students at Luong Ngoc Quyen High School. The study was conducted among 30 students, comprising 22 female students and 8 male students, who were already in the second quarter of the 2024-2025 academic year.

In this research, all students were asked to complete a speaking test called a pre-test, following which they participated in the experimental intervention, applying the 4/3/2 technique in the speaking lessons. A post-test was conducted on the participants after the 7-week intervention to assess the level of improvement in their fluency in speaking skills. Two questionnaires were used in collecting the data. The experimental participants were invited to respond to a pre-questionnaire investigating the group's responses towards the current speaking activities in class and a post-questionnaire measuring the group's attitude towards the application of the 4/3/2 technique in improving English speaking fluency.

The students' perceptions of the current speaking activities in class, as well as the efficacy of the 4/3/2 technique, were assessed using the scoring range of the survey's Likert scale (Sözen, 2019). Finally, the t-test was employed in testing the significance of the changes between the pre-test scores and post-test scores.

4. Results and Discussion

This section outlines an analysis of data and its interpretation with the goal of determining the effectiveness of the 4/3/2 technique in improving English speaking fluency.

Table 1: Students' pre–test and post-test scores

No	Students' code	Max score	Pre-test		Post-test	
			Scores	Classification	Scores	Classification
1	S1	10	4.7	Intermediate	4.7	Intermediate
2	S2	10	4.0	Intermediate	4.5	Intermediate
3	S3	10	3.5	Limited	3.9	Limited
4	S4	10	7.0	Advanced	7.2	Advanced
5	S5	10	4.5	Intermediate	4.5	Intermediate
6	S6	10	7.6	Advanced	7.6	Advanced
7	S7	10	3.6	Limited	3.8	Limited
8	S8	10	3.2	Limited	3.5	Limited
9	S9	10	6.1	Good	6.3	Good
10	S10	10	6.4	Good	6.5	Good
11	S11	10	7.3	Advanced	7.5	Advanced
12	S12	10	4.4	Intermediate	5.0	Intermediate
13	S13	10	5.7	Good	5.7	Good
14	S14	10	6.3	Good	6.4	Good
15	S15	10	3.4	Limited	3.7	Limited

16	S16	10	4.3	Intermediate	4.7	Intermediate
17	S17	10	5.4	Intermediate	5.6	Good
18	S18	10	5.6	Good	5.8	Good
19	S19	10	4.9	Intermediate	5.2	Intermediate
20	S20	10	5.8	Good	5.8	Good
21	S21	10	5.3	Intermediate	5.7	Good
22	S22	10	5.2	Intermediate	5.3	Intermediate
23	S23	10	4.8	Intermediate	5.0	Intermediate
24	S24	10	8.5	Native-Like	8.5	Native-Like
25	S25	10	4.1	Intermediate	4.6	Intermediate
26	S26	10	4.6	Intermediate	4.9	Intermediate
27	S27	10	5.2	Intermediate	5.5	Good
28	S28	10	8.8	Native-Like	9.0	Native-Like
29	S29	10	5.1	Intermediate	5.4	Intermediate
30	S30	10	3.7	Limited	4.0	Intermediate
Σ	N=30		159		165.8	
Mean score: $\underline{x} = \Sigma\frac{x}{n}$			5.3	Intermediate	5.53	Good

Table 1 illustrates the initial level of students' English-speaking fluency before applying the 4/3/2 technique. As shown in the table, pre-test scores from 30 high school students revealed a broad range of fluency, with most students (46.7%, or 14 out of 30) falling into the Intermediate category (scores between 4.0 and 5.5). This aligns with the average score of 5.31, reinforcing intermediate as the predominant level.

The distribution also highlights individual variation: 16.7% (5 students) were in the Limited range (<4.0), 20% (6 students) in Good (5.6–6.9), 10% (3 students) in Advanced (7.0–8.4), and 6.7% (2 students) reached Native-Like fluency (≥8.5). While students S24 and S28 achieved the highest scores (8.5 and 8.8), S8 recorded the lowest at 3.2, revealing a substantial proficiency gap. Notably, only 30% of students scored in the Good to Advanced range, indicating that above-average fluency was limited to a minority. Overall, the pre-test results serve as a crucial baseline for evaluating the impact of future interventions aimed at improving speaking fluency and addressing these disparities.

Based on Table 1, the post-test analysis after five weeks of applying the 4/3/2 technique shows a slight improvement in students' English speaking fluency. The mean score increased to 5.53, placing the group in the "Good" category, with a total score of 165.8, indicating varied fluency levels across students.

Some high-achieving students, such as S4 (7.0 to 7.2) and S11 (7.3 to 7.5), maintained their "Advanced" status, while S24 and S28 remained in the "Native-Like" group with near-perfect scores, suggesting limited room for improvement at higher levels.

Meanwhile, several students showed notable progress. For instance, S30 improved from 3.7 ("Limited") to 4.0 ("Intermediate"), and S12 progressed from 4.4 to 5.0 within the same category. The "Intermediate" group was the largest, comprising 12 out of 30 students. The "Good" category followed with 9 students (27%). The number of students in the "Limited" group slightly decreased from 5 to 4, while "Advanced" and "Native-Like" remained unchanged.

Overall, the post-test scores indicate that the 4/3/2 technique was moderately effective, particularly for "Intermediate" learners. However, extended implementation or supplementary strategies may be needed to address the needs of both low and high performers.

Table 2: Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test score	5.300	30	1.4579	.2662
	Post-test score	5.527	30	1.3806	.2521

The author conducted a paired-sample t-test using SPSS to compare participants' pre- and post-test results. As shown in Table 4.4, there was a difference between pre-implementation (M = 5.300, SD = 1.4579) and post-implementation (M = 5.527, SD = 1.3806) scores. In general, the mean of the post-test was higher than that one of the pre-test. It means that an improvement in students' English speaking fluency after applying the 4/3/2 technique.

Table 3: Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Significance	
				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	Pre-test score & Post-test score	30	.995	<.001	<.001

The analysis pinpointed a very strong and statistically significant correlation between the pre-test and the post-test scores (r = .995, p < .001), which indicates that students with higher initial results still maintained similar outcomes in the post-test. This correlation confirms the appropriateness of using the Paired Samples t-test because the two samples are related to each other.

Table 4: Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences	t	df	Significance	
		Mean			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	Pre-test score - Post-test score	-.2267	-7.577	29	<.001	<.001

The mean of the negative difference (-.2267), calculated as pre-test minus post-test, suggested that students had better post-test scores. The t-value = -7.577 and p-value < .001 showed that this difference is statistically significant at the .001 level. These results provided strong evidence to conclude that the 4/3/2 technique significantly improved the students' English speaking fluency.

Table 5: Students' responses to the current speaking activities in class

Statements	Mean	Level of agreement
Current speaking activities in class helped me improve my English fluency.	3.27	Neutral/ Nor agree
Current speaking activities in class encourage me to speak more English.	2.50	Disagree
Current speaking activities in class provide enough opportunities to practice real-life communication.	2.43	Disagree
Current speaking activities in class make me feel confident when participating.	1.86	Disagree
Current speaking activities in class use topics that are interesting and relevant to my interests.	3.30	Neutral/ Nor agree
Current speaking activities in class create a comfortable environment for speaking in English.	2.93	Neutral/ Nor agree
In current speaking activities in class, the teacher provides useful feedback on my speaking performance.	4.67	Strongly agree
In current speaking activities in class, the teacher encourages all students to participate actively.	3.87	Agree
In current speaking activities in class, the strategies used help me organize my ideas and speak more fluently.	3.73	Agree
In current speaking activities in class, the teacher applies techniques (e.g., role-plays, debates, storytelling) to enhance my speaking skills.	3.80	Agree

The data reflect student perceptions of the effectiveness of current speaking activities in their classes. Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), students rated their agreement with several statements. Their responses offer insight into how these activities impact various aspects of learning.

As shown in the table, overall feedback on current speaking activities was mixed. While some aspects were seen as effective, others require improvement. In terms of teacher support, most students responded positively. The highest mean score (4.67) was for the statement "The teacher provides useful feedback on my speaking performance." Other statements, such as "The teacher applies techniques (e.g., role-plays, debates, storytelling) to enhance my speaking skills" (mean = 3.80) and "The teacher encourages all students to participate actively" (mean = 3.87) also reflected student agreement. This suggests that learners appreciated the teacher's role in supporting their speaking development. Furthermore, the statement "The strategies used help me organize my ideas and speak more fluently" received a mean score of 3.73, indicating a perceived improvement in fluency when appropriate techniques were used.

Regarding the classroom environment, students were generally neutral. The mean score for "Current speaking activities create a comfortable environment for speaking in English" was 2.93. Additionally, the topic selection received a modest rating of 3.30, suggesting limited interest or relevance to students. The perceived impact on fluency was also moderate, with a mean score of 3.27 for the statement "Current speaking activities helped me improve my English fluency."

Notably, students reported limited opportunities for authentic communication. The statements "Provide enough opportunities to practice real-life communication" and "Encourage me to speak more English" received low mean scores of 2.43 and 2.50, respectively. The lowest score (1.86) was for "Make me feel confident when taking part," indicating that many students lack confidence during speaking activities.

In summary, the findings highlight speaking as a challenging skill for Vietnamese students and suggest a need to reassess and improve speaking tasks to better support learners' fluency and engagement.

Table 6: Students' responses to the current speaking
activities in class in order to improve English speaking fluency

Statements	Mean	Level of agreement
Using the 4/3/2 technique helps me improve my speaking fluency through repeated practice.	4.90	Strongly agree
Using the 4/3/2 technique trains me to speak more quickly and smoothly as the time decreases.	4.03	Agree
Using the 4/3/2 technique reduces hesitation and pauses in my speech.	3.67	Agree
Using the 4/3/2 technique encourages me to focus more on fluency rather than accuracy.	2.63	Neutral/ Nor agree
Using the 4/3/2 technique boosts my confidence in speaking English.	4.57	Strongly agree
Using the 4/3/2 technique pushes me to express my ideas more clearly under time pressure.	3.80	Agree
Using the 4/3/2 technique expands my vocabulary and improves my sentence structure.	2.93	Neutral/ Nor agree
Using the 4/3/2 technique helps me rely less on thinking in my native language before speaking English.	3.13	Neutral/ Nor agree
Using the 4/3/2 technique with different partners enhanced my communication skills.	3.43	Agree
Using the 4/3/2 technique motivates me to improve my English-speaking fluency.	4.83	Strongly agree

The collected data revealed students' generally positive responses to the integration of the 4/3/2 technique in speaking lessons. They enthusiastically acknowledged its benefits for improving speaking fluency, reflected in a high rating of 4.90. The technique was also perceived as effective in increasing motivation (4.83) and boosting confidence in speaking English (4.57). These findings highlight repetition, confidence, and motivation as the most positively perceived aspects of the technique.

Moreover, students recognized its role in enhancing speech smoothness and speed (4.03), promoting clearer expression under time pressure (3.80), and reducing hesitation (4.0). These results support the positive impact of time-limited tasks on fluency development.

However, despite the overall positive reception, students were more neutral regarding its effects on certain aspects. They showed uncertainty about the technique's

ability to reduce thinking in the mother tongue (3.13), expand vocabulary and sentence structure (2.93), and shift focus from accuracy to fluency (3.3). These areas appeared less influenced by the 4/3/2 technique alone.

The following discussion is based on the results of the speaking fluency tests and student questionnaires regarding the application of the 4/3/2 technique. Pre-test results indicated that many 11th-grade students struggled with speaking fluency, with most falling into the "Intermediate" category. The gap between "Limited" and "Native-like" levels highlights disparities in exposure and confidence. Limited fluency can hinder classroom participation, oral comprehension, and performance in speaking assessments, ultimately affecting academic outcomes. These findings emphasize the need for targeted fluency-oriented activities, such as the 4/3/2 technique, to build confidence and support learners at different proficiency levels.

Post-test gains demonstrated that incorporating the 4/3/2 technique significantly improved students' speaking fluency. These findings align with studies by Permata & Rozimela (2020), Rerung (2017), De Jong & Perfetti (2011), and Molina & Briesmaster (2017), which confirmed that time-pressured repetition fosters greater fluency than traditional methods. The results also reinforce previous quantitative research (Dos Santos & Ramírez-Ávila, 2022; Yen, 2019; Hien, 2014) on the effectiveness of the technique.

The pre-intervention questionnaire revealed mixed student perceptions toward existing speaking activities. Although teacher support and techniques were appreciated, many students remained uncertain about their effectiveness. This reflects Ur's (1996) view that successful speaking activities require both teacher guidance and learner engagement. Students also expressed discomfort with the speaking environment and topics, as well as a lack of confidence and real-world communication opportunities—concerns echoed by Brown (2007), Harmer (2011), and Richards (2006).

The post-questionnaire showed more positive responses, with students reporting increased fluency, motivation, and confidence—outcomes supported by Nation (1989), Thai & Boers (2016), and Yen (2019). Students noted that repeated practice under time pressure helped them speak more fluently and frequently. However, they also acknowledged some limitations, such as minimal impact on vocabulary growth, sentence structure, and L1 reliance.

To maximize the effectiveness of the 4/3/2 technique, teachers should provide clear instructions, integrate vocabulary and grammar support, and clarify learning objectives. Meaningful, level-appropriate prompts aligned with curricular themes and student interests should be carefully selected. Additionally, integrating follow-up activities—such as peer feedback and error analysis—can help reinforce linguistic development and fluency gains.

Although students responded positively to the technique, combining the 4/3/2 approach with other strategies and AI tools may further enhance fluency development. Future studies should explore more frequent and varied applications of the technique to maximize its benefits in different classroom contexts.

5. Recommendations

In view of the study's findings, it is recommended for three different target subjects: teachers, students, and further research.

Firstly, teachers should prioritize organizing speaking-focused activities to engage students and enhance their speaking fluency. The 4/3/2 technique is recommended as a practical method for classroom use.

Secondly, students should recognize the importance of speaking fluency and approach its practice with seriousness. As an active learning method, the 4/3/2 technique supports self-study and lifelong learning, benefiting not only English acquisition but also knowledge in other fields.

Regarding further research, increasing the number of participants or targeting different groups could better demonstrate the effectiveness of the 4/3/2 technique. Future studies are encouraged to apply this method to larger samples. Additionally, research should explore ways to integrate the 4/3/2 technique with other approaches to address challenges in monologic speech and to develop more comprehensive speaking skills, especially in communicative interaction.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of the 4/3/2 technique on 11th graders' speaking fluency through a 7-week intervention. The results demonstrated significant improvement in students' fluency, supporting previous findings and reinforcing the value of the 4/3/2 technique as an effective tool for enhancing second language fluency. These findings suggest potential implications for curriculum development and teaching practices, particularly the integration of time-constrained speaking tasks to meet diverse learner needs. However, students showed neutral attitudes toward the technique's influence on vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and reducing L1 use, highlighting ongoing challenges in language instruction.

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