

Pair Counting to Improve Grammar and Spoken Fluency

by **STEPHANIE HANSON**

English language learners are often more grammatically accurate in writing than in speaking. Many of my students, for example, can correctly use simple past tense verbs when writing a short paragraph about activities that took place over the weekend. However, when I ask them, “What did you do this past weekend?” on Monday mornings, I hear a lot of simple present verbs in their replies. As students focus on meaning to tell me about their weekends, their spoken fluency comes at a cost: their grammatical accuracy decreases. I wanted to find a way to help my students improve their oral grammar; that is, I wanted them to focus on grammar while still exercising their spoken fluency.

Soresi (2005) suggests a “sentences per minute” technique to help students build spoken fluency. With this approach, students count the number of sentences they produce about a topic in a given amount of time; then, in the same time limit, they talk about that topic again, attempting to increase the number of sentences they produce. Students may reuse or reformulate sentences from the first round during their second speaking attempt.

One problem with this technique, however, is that “sentences” can be difficult to define and count in natural speech. For instance, how do you count false starts and repetitions? How do you count run-on sentences? These utterances are common in spoken language, and they can be especially challenging for beginner- and

intermediate-level students to identify and count.

The solution I’ve used to make this exercise easier for monitoring fluency is to change what students count. Rather than counting complete sentences, students count specific grammatical structures. If we are working on describing past events, for example, students can count simple past tense verbs. My teen and young adult students in both English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) classrooms have enjoyed this exercise, and it is easy to do. The instructions below use simple past verbs as the target grammatical structure; suggestions for using this technique with other grammar topics are also provided.

PROCEDURE

Before you start, make sure students have paper and pencils or pens, and you should have some sort of timer and perhaps a bell or buzzer to let students know when the time for each round is up.

Step 1:

Explain the activity to the class and spend a few minutes doing a practice round to help students understand what they are supposed to count. Tell students that you will talk for one minute, and you want them to make a mark on their paper each time they hear you say a simple past verb. Demonstrate how to make tally (counting) marks on the board

Rather than counting complete sentences, students count specific grammatical structures.

if needed. Tell the students what you did last weekend (“I met my friend for coffee on Saturday morning; then I went grocery shopping. I drove home and cooked lunch, and then I cleaned my apartment . . .”). After one minute, ask the students how many simple past verbs they counted. If they do not have the correct number, review the simple past verbs that you said (*met, went, drove, cooked, etc.*) Note that you might have to prepare or rehearse in advance what you are going to say so that you know what the verb count—and the verbs—will be.

Step 2:

Put students into pairs. One partner will be a “talker,” and the other will be a “counter.”

Step 3:

Explain that the talkers will have one minute to answer the question “What did you do last weekend?” They need to use as many simple past verbs as possible when they describe their activities. The counters will count all the

correct simple past verbs that they hear their partner say. There is a chance that the counter will accidentally include incorrect simple past verbs (or miss simple past verbs that are correct), but this approach still works as a general gauge of spoken fluency.

Step 4:

Time students for one minute while the pairs talk and count. (You can adjust the amount of speaking time based on your students’ level.) After one minute, stop everyone by ringing a bell, sounding a buzzer, or loudly saying, “Stop!” or “Time’s up!” The counters should count their tally marks and tell the talkers how many simple past verbs they counted.

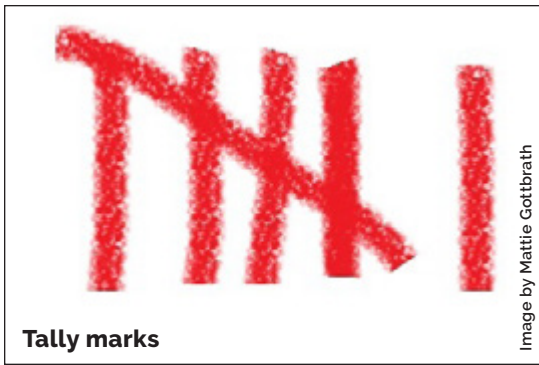
Step 5:

Students will expect to switch roles at this point—but they don’t! Be clear that you want the talkers to talk about the same topic again for the same amount of time. Their job is to try to increase the number of simple past verbs they use in the second round of speaking. They can repeat statements made in the first round, but they should try to talk a little faster and use a few more verbs. The counters will count again.

Step 6:

Time students for one minute while the pairs talk and count again. After one minute, stop everyone. The counters should tell the talkers how many simple past verbs they counted. Check to see how many students increased their first number, how many had the same number, and how many decreased their first number. (If students would be reluctant to give this information publically to the class, you can ask students to close their eyes, then get a show of raised hands so that you can see how many students’ verb count numbers increased, how many decreased, and how many stayed the same.) Occasionally a student’s number will go down the second time they speak. I believe





this may be because they are monitoring their speech more carefully and correcting their grammar, which reduces their fluency in favor of increased accuracy.

Step 7:

Have students switch talker and counter roles; then repeat Steps 3 through 6.

BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

There are several benefits to using this activity in classes. First of all, it keeps all students actively engaged. Half of the students must talk, the other half must count, and all of them are focusing on a specific grammatical form at the same time. Secondly, it’s a motivating activity in that students have a way to quickly “quantify” their fluency in Round One (Step 4), and most will see an immediate fluency improvement in Round Two (Step 6) as the number of simple past verbs they produce will probably increase. As in a video game, students receive a personal score, and then they want to beat it. Finally, this activity requires little preparation and only a few simple materials. It’s easy to do if you have a few minutes left at the end of class or if you want to energize students with a simple interactive task.

One limitation of this activity is that it may encourage speakers to produce lists

of short, simple sentences. This output is acceptable and expected, though, with beginner- and intermediate-level students, and with advanced-level students focusing on grammatical accuracy.

ADAPTING FOR OTHER TOPICS

In the example above, I suggested using a simple past prompt and having students count simple past verbs. However, you can focus on other grammatical structures by changing the prompt and making sure students know what they are supposed to count. See the Variations box for suggestions.

Variations	
Prompt	Grammatical Structure to Count
Describe what you usually do on Saturdays.	Simple present
What are your plans for this weekend?	Future with “will” or “be going to”
What are you doing this semester?	Present progressive
What have you accomplished this year?	Present perfect
Give your friend advice to do well in school.	Modals of advice
Describe everything in your bedroom. Use both countable and noncountable nouns.	Quantifiers and nouns

USING THIS TECHNIQUE IN HOMEWORK

While this is an effective interactive pair exercise to use in class, you can also adapt it to be used as homework if your students

As in a video game, students receive a personal score, and then they want to beat it.

Pair counting is a quick, easy, interactive, and motivating way to help students work on spoken fluency while also focusing on producing a specific grammatical form.

have access to an audio recording device. Since most students won't have a partner available at home, they have to count their own grammatical structures. Assign students a prompt; then tell them to make a recording of themselves talking for one minute in response to that prompt. Then, they should listen to the recording and count the number of grammatical structures they said correctly. They make a second recording, talking for one minute on the same topic, then listen and count the grammar structures again. In my experience, students are generally better able to identify errors when they are listening to a sample—their own or a partner's—than while they are talking themselves.

In classes where all students have digital recording capability, I ask students to send me their two recordings electronically to ensure that everyone does this homework. If you have time to listen to their recordings, you can give them personalized feedback on their speech. If, like many teachers, you don't have time to listen to their recordings, you can tell your students that you will randomly check a selection of the recordings; this approach helps keep them honest in doing the homework. Another option is to ask students to give you a piece of paper showing how many grammar structures they said in the first recording and how many grammar structures they said in the second recording.

If you want students to further focus on form, you can ask them to transcribe each of the grammar structures they said in their recordings; sometimes writing the form they heard on the recording helps them notice and correct more of their own mistakes. It is worth noting that some students don't have mistakes at all because the prompts are so focused on a

particular grammar structure that students' self-monitoring, related to that structure, is high to begin with.

CONCLUSION

Pair counting is a quick, easy, interactive, and motivating way to help students work on spoken fluency while also focusing on producing a specific grammatical form. Because it's adaptable to many different grammar structures and can be used both in and out of class, you can probably find a use for it with your own students.

REFERENCE

Soresi, S. 2005. SPM: A new approach to achieving fluency. *Modern English Teacher* 14 (3): 39–43.

Stephanie Hanson has been an English Language Fellow in Indonesia and Ecuador, and an English Language Specialist in Venezuela, Turkey, and Brazil. She currently teaches in the English Language Program at the University of Minnesota.



Adjectives that describe Pair Counting