Fluency: Implications for Classroom Instruction

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The term fluency is defined by *The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing* as "freedom from word identification problems that might hinder comprehension" (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 85). Fluency bridges the gap between word recognition skills and comprehension. In other words, fluent readers do not spend inordinate time and resources decoding words and can therefore concentrate on comprehension. When a student reads fluently, his decoding is effortless and often so fast that he is unconscious of his ability to simultaneously recognize, decode and comprehend.

Step into any classroom in the United States today, and you may encounter the following scenario. Students in a small group take turns reading aloud a page or paragraph. One student is randomly selected and begins reading "his" page. He begins to read orally and frequently stumbles over words. The teacher constantly prompts him or even "gives" him the correct words. He continues reading haltingly, word by word, with little or no expression. He struggles to complete the page, and in doing so, punctuates his reading with heavy sighs and breathing. After this labored attempt at reading aloud, this student catches the teacher's eye as if to ask, "Do I have to continue? Am I through now? Don't you want someone else to read?" The wish is granted and now it is someone else's turn to read, but not before the teacher asks a few questions just to make sure everyone has comprehended the reading. Of course, our friend is able to answer only a few, if any

questions. Thus, it is apparent that this student has derived little meaning from the printed words on the page.

Why does this scenario matter? Most scholars would argue that gaining meaning from the reading is the ultimate goal in reading. However, in order for meaning-making to occur, one must process the text accurately and automatically. Students who do not read fluently, like the one in the example above, spend too much mental energy decoding the words, often inaccurately, which likely results in poor comprehension. This inability to read fluently and comprehend text can also adversely affect an individual's motivation to read. Students who experience difficulty in acquiring basic word recognition skills are not as motivated to read as their more capable peers. These dysfluent readers read less text in a given amount of time than more fluent readers. Indeed, reading practice is thought to be a powerful contributor to the development of accurate, fluent reading (Allington, 2001; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Krashen, 1993; Postlethwaite & Ross, 1992; Stanovich, 1986), yet research has demonstrated that dysfluent readers spend less time reading than their more able peers (Allington, 1983; 1984). It is nearly impossible for slower readers to catch up with classmates who read at normal rates unless they invest significantly more time and energy in reading.

Fluency has been a neglected topic in the field of reading instruction in recent years. Currently, however, there is a renewed interest in fluency among researchers and literacy advocates. The National Reading Panel, for instance, considers fluency to be an essential part of reading development and takes up the issue in some detail. Further, some researchers have broadened an earlier working definition of dyslexia as essentially

involving significant deficits in "single word reading" (Lyon, 1995) to one that combines the quick, accurate reading of text with "good understanding" (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003). In this view, dyslexics, among other difficulties, experience a striking and primary failure to establish reading fluency.

Although there is a growing awareness among some teacher educators that fluency is an important issue, this is not reflected in serious treatments of the topic in methods texts—the work of Rasinski (2003) is something of an exception here--or in general classroom practice. In light of this, it seems important to survey some of the rich and useful strategies that clinicians, teachers, and researchers have developed for promoting this critical skill. This is a representative rather than an exhaustive overview.

Effective Instructional Techniques for Building Reading Fluency

There is a substantial body of research that explores instructional interventions designed for building reading fluency and for use in classrooms and reading clinics. Modeled oral reading, supported oral reading, repeated reading, and performance reading have established efficacy as instructional techniques designed to aid teachers and clinicians in developing more proficient and fluent readers.

Modeling Fluent Oral Reading

Modeling fluent oral reading for less able students may facilitate fluency development. Reading aloud to students in an expressive, effortless, and natural manner provides a model of what reading orally should sound like. Students are able to hear how the reader's voice "brings alive" the written text. By drawing students' attention to the fluent, oral rendering of text, the message is conveyed that meaning is communicated through the expression, intonation, and phrasing of the words. Rasinski (2000) suggests

asking students to remember how the teacher read the passage and how the teacher's expressiveness affected their understanding. This enables teachers to send the message that fluent, oral reading is more than just reading accurately (Rasinski, 2003); it is also *how* the words are interpreted.

When reading aloud challenging texts to students, teachers may adjust their reading rate and demonstrate that fluent reading is not necessarily fast reading; again, the emphasis is on deriving meaning and interpreting the text. When reading a technical passage, the teacher may choose to slow down and process the text more deliberately, and then discuss this adjustment of the reading rate with her students (Rasinski, 2000).

Reading aloud also provides students with an opportunity to hear text that they may otherwise be unable to read on their own. As Cohen's (1968) study demonstrates, modeling fluent oral reading significantly increases comprehension and reading vocabulary. Reading to students exposes them to more sophisticated vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998); through read-alouds, students are exposed to the vocabulary of decontextualized language that they are more likely to encounter in written text than in oral language (Beck & McKeown, 2001). This read aloud builds comprehension and vocabulary by providing a springboard for meaningful discussions where students develop a critical understanding of the text including specified vocabulary words.

Through a clear, expressive, oral reading of text, the teacher can heighten students' interest in reading. This creates an enjoyable experience for listeners. As Trelease (1995) shares with teachers, human beings are "pleasure-centered." By reading aloud to students, we are conditioning them to associate reading with pleasure. Teachers

who love to read their own materials and enjoy reading aloud to their students are the pillars of successful models of fluent reading (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991).

Supported Oral Reading

Teachers who successfully model fluent reading understand the importance of moving students toward a level of independence. Students may begin by watching or listening to their more capable teacher read the text, then attempting the same task with the teacher present in order to guide or assist the student with the task by providing immediate feedback. Supported oral reading may be used as a scaffolding device to ease the transition from total teacher modeling to student independence (Rasinski, 2003).

Supported reading, coached reading or assisted reading, refer to a more proficient reader supporting the dysfluent reader. The more proficient reader progressively reduces the assistance offered as the less fluent reader becomes more independent (Rasinski, 2003). Rasinski characterizes supported oral reading as having a minimum of two readers who read aloud the same text. Supported oral reading may be depicted through different configurations.

Choral reading one-on-one with a student has been referred to as the *Neurological Impress Method (NIM)* or *assisted reading* (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). As with most supportive methods, material at the student's instructional level should be read. Heckelman's (1969) neurological impress method was used for dysfluent remedial readers and was supposed to "impress" the words into the student's brain. Currently, this method involves the student and teacher simultaneously reading the same text aloud at a reasonably swift pace. The student sits with the teacher and they hold the book together. As the teacher points to the words, she reads into the student's ear. The teacher controls

the pace, expression, pitch and any other prosodic features and can adjust them accordingly. This lesson continues until the teacher notices the student becoming fatigued. Because this method of assisted reading is completed using one-on-one teacher support, it is very labor-intensive but has been quite successful in improving the reading fluency of remedial readers (Hollingsworth, 1978).

Another variation of choral reading similar to the NIM involves pairs of readers. These pairs usually comprise one reader who is more proficient than the other. Keith Topping (1987) also recommends pairing adults (parents, teacher, aides, tutors) with a student, as well as pairing two students. This technique is easily adaptable for both classroom and clinical use. The material should be chosen by the less proficient reader and should be on his instructional reading level. The paired reading session may start out with both readers reading aloud (together) the same text. However, the more proficient reader does not read into the student's ear as done during the NIM. The more proficient reader should read with expression and intonation and should begin reading at a pace slightly faster than what the less-proficient student may generally read. When the more proficient reader notices the student gaining confidence, then the more proficient reader should either stop or lower her voice to a whisper so that the student is supporting himself more. There should be an established signal that the less-proficient student initiates which indicates his desire to read the text independently.

An adaptation of paired reading is Marie Carbo's (1978) "talking books." Books are recorded on audiotapes or CD's and played for the student as he follows along in his copy of the book during the initial reading. During the second reading of the book, the student should read along with the tape. This *reading along with the tape* should

continue until the student is able to read the text independently. When recording these books or stories, the more proficient reader should use caution and make sure the recording is at a rate where the student is able to follow along and attend to the printed text. The reader should also read with expression and intonation when recording the text.

Older struggling readers may use the recording technique as a way to build their reading fluency. These older readers can record books for the purpose of assisting children in elementary schools or even relatives in becoming more fluent readers. Because the books or stories may not be recorded until the reader is able to read the text fluently with proper prosodic features, this may take multiple re-readings for these older struggling readers. After they have practiced reading the text so that they are able to record the text with a fluent reading, then they, too, have undergone a fluency intervention known as practice reading or repeated reading.

Echo reading (Morris & Slavin, 2002) is anther form of supported reading, which includes the student echoing, or repeating, the lines of print the teacher reads aloud. The material chosen should be no harder than the student's instructional reading level. The teacher reads aloud as she finger-point-reads the text; once again, the teacher is reading with the appropriate prosodic features. The student then echoes back the text, also finger-point-reading what the teacher just read aloud. During this process, the student may feel comfortable enough to take the lead. If this is the case, the teacher should gradually release the responsibility of the reading to the student.

Repeated Reading of Connected Text

The oldest and most widely cited and used method to improve reading fluency is the repeated reading technique (Meyer & Felton, 1999; National Reading Panel, 2000;

Samuels, 1979; 2002; Torgesen, Rashotte, & Alexander, 2001). Repeated reading requires students to read aloud a passage at the appropriate reading level, several times, until the desired rate of reading is achieved. The National Reading Panel (2000) found the repeated reading method to be the only instructional technique for which there is consistent, positive support of efficacy in increasing reading fluency. In the two decades since its inception, more than 100 studies have been published testing the repeated reading method (Samuels, 2002).

A consistent finding indicates that repeated readings produce statistically significant improvement in reading rate, word recognition, and oral reading expression on the practiced passage (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). Repeated reading of connected text has shown improvements in rate, accuracy, and comprehension (Bowers, 1993; Dowhower, 1987; O'Shea, Sindelar, & O'Shea, 1985; Samuels, 1979).

Why are repeated readings of text so beneficial? As with any task, the more practice, the more natural and automatic the task becomes. Fluent readers spend little cognitive attention or mental energy on decoding words. Through practice in instructional level material, decoding may become so automatic that there is plenty of mental energy left for comprehension. Repeated reading offers this model of fluency development.

Assisted repeated reading requires a more proficient reader to be present. A 50 to 300 word passage is chosen at the student's instructional reading level (Dowhower, 1989). The more proficient reader provides a "fluent first reading" for the less proficient reader, where the focus is on reading the passage with appropriate accuracy, rate, and prosody. The student practices reading aloud the passage until a certain criterion reading rate is achieved.

After each reading, the teacher or student may choose to chart the reader's rate on a graph, or at least keep some record of the reader's rate (Allington, 2001; Blachowicz, Sullivan, & Cieply, 2001; Dowhower, 1989; Meyer & Felton, 1999; Morris, 2005; Rasinski, 2003). The student should see the rate continue to rise, if the repeated readings are effective. Typically only three to four re-readings with daily sessions averaging 10-15 minutes are required to improve the reading rate (Bowers, 1993; Young, Bowers, & MacKinnon, 1996;). Morris (2005) suggests three readings for each passage. This process continues with the instructional level material gradually increasing in difficulty.

As mentioned above, during assisted repeated readings, the teacher may begin modeling for the student by orally reading a portion of the text or by reading the entire text aloud, focusing on the rhythmic and syntactic cues of the passage with prosodic reading (Meyer & Felton, 1999). The student then reads the text multiple times throughout the week in the presence of the teacher. If the student begins to compromise the meaning of the sentence or reads inaccurately a large portion of the sentence, the teacher may draw his attention to the miscues or ask the student to reread the sentence (Morris, 2005).

The repeated reading techniques require reading rate benchmarks, and many reading scholars have used or adapted Hasbrouck and Tindal's (1992) curriculum-based oral reading fluency norms for students in grades 2-5 to create criteria for reading rates (Allington, 2001; Blachowicz, Sullivan, & Cieply, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000). The criteria depend upon the grade level of the passage being read. Rasinski (2003) uses the following criteria when targeting the number of Words Read Correctly Per Minute (WCPM), which offers a combined accuracy and rate score:

Grade Level	Target Number of WCPM (Rate and Accuracy)
Late First Grade (Second Half)	60
Second Grade	90
Third Grade	100
Fourth Grade	110
Fifth Grade	120
Sixth Grade and above	140

Morris (2005) suggests a range as a guide to expected oral reading rates:

Grade Level	Target Range of WPM (Rate)
First Grade	30-70
Second Grade	60-90
Third Grade	80-110
Fourth Grade	95-120
Fifth Grade	110-140
Sixth Grade	110-150
Seventh Grade	115-160

Repeated readings have proven efficacy in improving student's decoding, rate, and comprehension when implemented on a regular basis. Reading clinics across the country use repeated readings as a method for developing fluency in struggling readers. The one-to-one teacher to student ratio creates an intimacy that motivates and engages students in these clinical settings. However, classroom teachers with a 25 to 1 student to teacher ratio may face challenges in implementing repeated readings in the classroom. An

option for classroom teachers may be to pair a less fluent reader with a more fluent reader to reduce the direct responsibility of the classroom teacher. Either way, orally reading the same passage multiple times provides the practice dysfluent readers need in order to become more accurate and automatic when decoding the text; thus, freeing cognitive resources for the demands of text comprehension.

Although many classroom teachers are intellectually aware of the scientific evidence supporting repeated readings, many teachers still face the dilemma of how to make repeated readings appealing and engaging. Performance reading may offer a variation of repeated reading where students are provided with a legitimate purpose for completing repeated readings.

Performance Reading

Performance reading embraces the primary feature of repeated readings (Allington, 2001; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999; Nathan & Stanovich, 1991; Rasinski, 2003). Students read and rehearse a script, poem, speech, or passage multiple times throughout a week in preparation for their week-end performance. Because students are performing for an audience, students are charged with repeatedly reading their text with the notion of "hooking their audience" (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991). This requires students to engage in a full understanding of the text if their performance is to render full audience engagement (Rasinski, 2003; Stayter & Allington, 1991).

Poetry begs to be performed and offers the elements of repetition, rhythm, rhyme, and word phrases that may aid in developing fluency (Perfect, 1999). By reading aloud poetry, students perform repeated readings for authentic purposes. The meaning of poetry

is carried not only in the written words but also in the oral interpretation. This can become an enjoyable and exciting part of a classroom experience. Poetry Coffeehouses or Cafés provide a creative setting for imaginative and personal performances. The performances reflect individual interpretations of poems while providing the opportunity to practice toward fluent expressive reading. In addition, poetry's brevity engages many students, and often, they are not as reluctant to read poems multiple times.

While poetry tends to be an individual performance, Reader's Theatre engages many in performance reading. In Reader's Theatre, the emphasis is on reading the spoken words from the script with the appropriate gestures. This form of repeated reading requires students to execute the performance with fluency and a full understanding of the text while heightening student interest in pronunciation, intonation, duration, and pitch of their oral language; dialogue is also emphasized and enhanced with appropriate gestures such as shrugging shoulders, facial expressions, pointing fingers, snapping, nodding heads, chin scratching, etc. (Flynn, 2004).   Planning and extensive practice time must be allotted by classroom teachers for successful performance reading.

Many teachers plan for multiple Reader's Theatre performances each week. Because most scripts include between five and ten parts, a typical classroom with 25 students may include three to four "Theatre Troupes" each week. During a weekly theatre session, each student in the class is provided a copy of the group's script with his part highlighted. Teachers may choose to assign parts or students may audition for the parts. The teacher usually reads through the scripts with each group modeling a fluent reading of the text to be performed. In addition, the teacher also asks students comprehension questions which may focus on story elements, characterization, reader response, etc.

Students are often assigned to read their parts of the scripts at home and then have time in class to practice or read their scripts (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). With this amount of repeated reading, it is very likely that students may read and reread their parts as many as 20 times before the performance. It is critical that the teacher meet with different troupes to provide feedback before the performance; this feedback may focus on the correct pronunciation of words, reading with expression and emotion, and reading with the appropriate rate and volume. Then on Fridays for approximately 15-30 minutes, it is time for each troupe to perform.

Reader's Theatre differs from plays or other types of performances because readers read their parts aloud rather than memorize them. Reader's Theatre encourages students to *interpret* the text that they are reading and to read with an *appropriate* speed or rate rather than just simply reading fast.

Strategies like Reader's Theatre and Poetry Café provide an authentic venue for students to *perform* a script, poem, speech or play from a book or story they have read, using minimal props (Allington, 2001; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999; Rasinski, 2003). In each case, students read and re-read the script or poem so that in the end, they will perform with fluency, appropriate prosody, and a complete and thorough understanding of the text. Because props are minimal, students read from their scripts, and use their expression, intonation, rate and other prosodic features to convey the meaning of the story/poem to audience members. A flawless performance results from many repeated readings. These methods of performance reading offer authentic, gratifying, and engaging forms of repeated reading that are sure to motivate students and

provide teachers with evidence of students' improved reading fluency (Griffith &

Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999).

Conclusion

There is now increasing evidence at hand that achieving fluency is necessary for

effective reading ability. Nonetheless, this issue receives comparatively little attention in

reading methods texts, journals devoted to practice, or at national reading education

conferences. It seems appropriate, therefore, that educators more thoroughly acquaint

themselves with both the breadth and depth of strategies available for the cultivation of

fluency. While this survey of fluency instructional methods is not exhaustive, it does

highlight useful techniques that have shown positive results in clinical and quasi-

experimental research. The methods surveyed here offer teachers a variety of

participation structures that range from clinic to classroom, from individual to whole

group, yet all can be rewarding and engaging for students and teachers alike.

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