



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper

Fluency

“‘Attention to meaning’ is paramount in assessing fluency.”

~ Mary Lee Prescott-Griffin and Nancy L. Witherell, 2004

*Fluency in Focus: Comprehension
Strategies for All Young Readers*, p. 36

WHAT IS FLUENCY?

According to the National Reading Panel (NICHHD, 2000, p. 3-1), fluency is reading “...with speed, accuracy, and proper expression.” *Put Reading First* characterizes fluent reading as natural sounding, conversational, smooth, and expressive and contrasts it with disfluent reading which is “word by word ...choppy, and plodding” (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p.21). Johns and Berglund (2002) stress “appropriate rate” instead of speed, an issue also addressed by Rasinski (2000), “Fluent and understandable reading, not fast reading, is the goal of our instruction. Fluent reading is often quick-paced, but not always. Sometimes...readers need to slow down and process texts more deliberately” (p. 150). Furthermore, fluency is the bridge between word identification and constructing meaning (Johns & Berglund, 2002). Thus, a good working definition of fluency is:

Fluency is the ability to read with accuracy, expression/phrasing, appropriate rate, and comprehension.

WHY IS FLUENCY IMPORTANT?

Fluency is vital to comprehension, and it is one of the most common reading problems. Disfluent readers consume much of their mental energy attempting to decode text, leaving little attention for comprehension (Samuels, 1997; Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; Rasinski, 2000). Similarly, disfluent readers most often lack the prosody, or meaningful phrasing, that will aid comprehension. A slow, labored reading rate may indicate

inadequate word recognition skills or “lack of sensitivity to the phrase—the natural unit of meaning in reading” (Rasinski, 2000, p. 150). Reading thus becomes a frustrating process for disfluent readers. The painful struggle leads them to avoid reading, which is the very activity which will improve their fluency. Thus, the student’s reading proficiency will decline. Reading rate certainly should be used as a diagnostic indicator when assessing students’ strengths and needs (Rasinski, 2000).

WHAT INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES SUPPORT FLUENCY DEVELOPMENT?

There are several research based instructional practices that promote fluency development, all of which include two necessary ingredients: modeling and rereading of texts.

Repeated Readings — Students reread short passages (50-200 words) from easy, high interest stories. An assistant (teacher aide, parent, another student, volunteer) records the speed and number of errors on a graph. Until their next timed turn, the students practice reading the same passage. This procedure is repeated until a predetermined words-per-minute criterion rate is reached. Having students keep a graph of their reading rates is a strong motivational tool as it is a visual record of their progress.

There is a strong body of research to support the use of repeated readings. Samuels found in his study that as reading speed increased the number of word recognition errors decreased and the starting speed

for the next selection was higher than the previous starting speed. “The fact that starting rates were faster with each new selection and fewer rereadings were necessary to reach goals indicates transfer of training and a general improvement in reading fluency” (1997, p. 377). Repeated reading provides the practice necessary to make word recognition skills automatic, and as the decoding barrier is broken, comprehension improves (Samuels, 1997).

Use of Poetry — Rasinski (2000) espouses the use of authentic purposes for achieving repeated readings. One way to accomplish this is through practicing poetry for later performance. Finding the appropriate text is key to this process; brief, predictable reading materials that lend themselves well to oral interpretation and which are within students’ independent-instructional range should be used. Rhyming poetry is an excellent choice. Students can then reread the poetry with the purpose of preparing for the performance. Teachers can make the performance an event in many ways such as calling it Poetry Day and inviting parents, another class, and/or the principal and other school personnel.

Choral Reading makes use of poetry for fluency development. As children learn the prosodic elements of the poems with which they are working, they also develop their awareness of syntactic patterns. Selections can be read in unison by the class, a line per child, a line or lines per groups. The teacher can display the poem on chart paper or give each student a copy from which to read.

Reader’s Theatre offers another opportunity for authentic purpose for repeated readings. Reader’s Theater, as its name implies, relies solely on the readers’ voices to convey meaning; and this principle should guide selection of stories for adaptation to scripts. Stories that present characters involved in a lot of conversation or thought will work better for reading than those which have a great deal of physical activity. As with poetry, the reader’s theater text should be within the reader’s instructional range. The class can be divided into repertory groups and given appropriate scripts which have at least four or five recurring roles. After the scripts (or stories on which the scripts are based) are read aloud by the teacher, the groups then meet on a daily basis to rehearse with their groups and take scripts home for further nightly

practice. A practice schedule that is carefully implemented can result in students having read their scripts 15-20 times by the end of the week, when they perform for a real audience which, like the poetry performances, might consist of other classes, parents, school personnel, or the class itself. In order for Reader’s Theatre to accomplish the goal of repeated readings, avoid emphasis on props, costumes, and “learning” parts, and DO emphasize the importance of reading practice. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker note, “Readers Theatre seems to offer teachers a way to incorporate repeated readings within a meaningful and purposeful context” (1998, p.333). While circulating during “rehearsal,” the teacher can also maximize opportunities for modeling, even using **echo reading**; with echo reading the teacher reads a line or lines with correct phrasing and expression then asks the student to “echo” her reading. The process is repeated until the student demonstrates satisfactory reading of that particular passage.

Modeling — It is imperative that teachers provide strong models of fluent reading to their students. They need to hear appropriate rate, phrasing, and expression put into practice as well as have opportunities to discuss and reflect upon how meaning is conveyed through the use of phrasing and expression (Rasinski, 2003; Richards, 2000).

Paired Oral Readings — After passages are selected, students read them silently. Then they pair off and read the passage to each other three times in succession, with the listener giving feedback. The teacher can introduce paired reading by modeling it for the class with the assistance of a volunteer (Richards, 2000). Rasinski (2000) offers another version involving parents reading with their children 10 to 15 minutes each evening. The parent reads a passage to the child first; then they read it with the child several times; next, the child reads to the parent, with the parent providing positive feedback. Buddy reading is a similar activity in which an older disfluent student is paired with a younger disfluent student. The older student then has a real reason to practice as he prepares to read to and with the younger student using one of the younger student’s texts. The additional practice builds the older student’s fluency, and the additional modeling and practice gained through the sessions benefits the fluency of the younger student as well. It’s a win-win situation.

SUMMARY

Fluency is a vital component of the reading process. In order for comprehension to occur, readers must be able not only to decode and identify words but

also be able to do so accurately with appropriate phrasing, expression, and rate. There are a variety of instructional practices available for teachers which promote reading fluency and motivation.

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