



## Fluency Matters

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Is reading fluency hot or not? It seems that this component of reading has experienced a roller coaster existence for quite a long time. Fluency was actually the goal of reading instruction in the early stages of American schools. Although it wasn't called fluency then; rather it was more often called recitation.

In early days of the United States, fluent, expressive reading was viewed as a legitimate goal for reading instruction. According to historians of reading (e.g., Hyatt, 1943; Smith, 1965), in many early American homes there often were few books and few members of a family who were able to read. Thus, in order for all members of a family to enjoy the benefits of written texts one person had to read aloud to the others. By the mid-1800s, schools began to use a form of oral recitation that focused

practice, the students orally reading or reciting the passage for the teacher and fellow students. Students' reading was judged by the teacher on the quality of their oral reading and their recall of what they had read. The effectiveness of teachers was often judged by the fluent quality of students' reading (James, 1892).

However, with the advent of the progressive era in education reading fluency took a back seat to silent reading comprehension. Scholars of the time argued that oral reading instruction gave priority to oral expression over reading for meaning. In 1891 the great American and New England educator Horace Mann (Hoffman & Segel, 1983) claimed that over 90% of students do not understand the meaning of the texts they reading during reading instruction because of the over-

viewed primarily as an oral reading phenomena since it was observable only during oral reading.

And so, for the better part of the 20th century reading fluency was not viewed as a critical part of reading. Indeed, in 1983 Allington called fluency the neglected goal of the reading curriculum even though a growing body of evidence was pointing to its importance. It was until the review of research by the National Reading Panel (2000) that reading fluency once again was brought to the forefront of reading instruction. The Panel found a compelling body of evidence that supported fluency instruction as a method for improving not just fluency, but overall reading proficiency, including comprehension.

Unfortunately, one of the ways for measuring reading fluency is by a reader's speed of reading. Faster reading was found to be correlated with more proficient reading. And so, in the name of fluency instruction, instructional programs were developed with the aim to increase reading speed. Students learned that reading passages as fast as possible, without regard for meaning, was a good thing. Speed might increase, but overall reading proficiency did not. As a result, for the past six years, reading fluency has been rated as a "not hot" topic that does not deserve to be hot by reading scholars who are polled in the International Reading Association's "What's Hot" survey. And so,

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on elocution or expressive oral reading as both the primary method and goal of reading instruction (Hoffman, 1987; Hoffman & Segel, 1983). The recitation lesson usually involved the teacher orally reading a text followed by the students orally practicing the passage on their own and, after a sufficient period of

emphasis on the more observable aspects of oral reading. And so reading fluency lost favor and was relegated to, at best, to a minor spot in the reading curriculum. The focus went from oral fluency to silent reading comprehension (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). It should be noted that at that time fluency was

fluency is now being neglected once again in many classrooms.

### So Just What is Fluency and Why is it Not Hot?

We write this article because we are convinced that fluency is important and wish to make the case that students need to be instructed in fluency and that fluency instruction can be made to be efficient, engaging, and not a “need for speed.”

First, let us clarify the nature of fluency. Reading Fluency consists of two major components – automatic word recognition, and expressiveness in oral reading. Automatic word recognition refers to ability of fluent readers to decode words so effortlessly that they can direct their limited cognitive energy to comprehension, the ultimate goal of reading. It is not sufficient for students to be able to decode words accurately as is taught during phonics instruction. Although phonics instruction leads readers to accurately identifying words, the process of “sounding a word” takes up a considerable amount of attention that could otherwise be devoted to making meaning.

We would like to argue that the ultimate goal of phonics instruction is for readers not to have to use it. As you read this article you employ very little of your phonics skills. Most of the words you encounter are sight words that are instantly decoded, thus leaving those cognitive resources for comprehension.

The problem for automaticity comes from the way it assessed. Reading speed has been found to be a simple, reliable, and valid way to assess automaticity. The problem, however, is that reading speed does not cause automaticity. It is automaticity that causes improved reading speed. So

when teachers work on reading speed they have it backwards, they are working on the consequence and not the cause of automaticity. Don't get us wrong, we do want students to become fast readers. We want to become fast the very same way that you who are reading this article became a fast reader – you read a lot, indifferent ways, different text, different purposes, but you read a lot. As a result of authentic reading practice your automaticity naturally developed, so did your speed of reading.

The other component of fluency is the one that goes back to the early days of reading instruction – recitation, elocution, or expression. Fluent speakers and readers speak or read orally with appropriate expression that reflects and even enhances the meaning of the text. Expression is easily measured – simply listen to students read orally and rate them on an oral expression rubric.

Research has found that readers who read with good expression when reading orally tend to be the best comprehenders when reading silently. Moreover, as readers decline in their oral reading expression, their silent reading comprehension also declines. This connection has been found for students from the elementary grades through high school (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005 ; Pinnell, Pikulski, Wilson, Cambell, Gough, & Beatty, 1995; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 1999).

Interestingly then, teaching students to read with good oral expression

appears to be associated with good silent reading comprehension. The century old argument of oral fluency versus silent comprehension seems to have been a false dichotomy. Good readers need work in both areas; improvement in one leads to improvement in the other.

### To What Extent do Students who Struggle in Reading have Fluency Concerns?

If fluency is not emphasized appropriately in schools, it seems likely that difficulties in fluency should be manifested in struggling readers. We recently reviewed the reading profiles of 21 third grade students who did not pass a state-mandated reading proficiency test which was primarily a silent reading comprehension test. We were stunned by what we found.

For automaticity, we considered a reading rate of 96 words read correctly per minute (wcpm) or less to be an indication of automaticity concerns. The 96 wcpm reflects a 3rd grade student automaticity level that is 10% below the 50 percentile rate for the end of the year (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). Thirteen students (50%) were identified as reading below this threshold. The average reading speed for these students was 68 wcpm.

Finally, for expression, we rated students' oral expression on a 6-point rubric where any score of 3 or below indicates that expression in reading may be a concern. Twelve students were given ratings of 3 or below, with the average score for these students being 2.8.

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Of the 26 students who did not pass the general silent reading competency test, 14 exhibited difficulties in one or both areas of reading fluency. Over half the students exhibiting poor silent reading comprehension exhibited difficulties in some aspect of oral reading fluency. Although this survey of students is not large, it does reflect the findings of other studies. In their larger scale study of students who perform poorly on high-stakes tests of silent reading comprehension, Valencia and Buly (2004) report that over two-thirds of poor performers

the following: modeling fluent reading for students; guided repeated reading of material at instructional reading level or higher; assisted reading (reading while listening to more simultaneously listening to a more fluent reading of the same text) of material at instructional reading level or higher; and focusing students' attention on expression and meaning while reading. At the heart of intensive fluency instruction is the repeated practice of a text until it can be read fluently (Samuels, 1979). In his seminal research on

they have an authentic and engaging reason to rehearse (repeated reading). Interestingly, the goal of the rehearsal is to produce a meaningful and expressive performance of the text. Speed is not a major consideration of the rehearsal. Certain texts lend themselves to performance. These include poetry, song, readers theater scripts, monologues, dialogues, speeches, letters, etc. Using these elements and ideas as building blocks we have developed two approaches to intensive fluency instruction and intervention.

In his seminal research on repeated readings Samuels found that repeatedly reading one text not only improved students' reading of that text, it also led to improved reading of other texts not previously encountered. In essence, a transfer of learning and fluency took place from the text practiced to the new text.

exhibited fluency difficulties. A significant number of struggling readers appear to exhibit difficulty in fluency. The logical inference then is that appropriate and effective instruction in reading fluency may help lead a significant number of struggling readers to become proficient.

### Effective Instruction to Improve Fluency

Reviews of research have identified several elements of effective fluency instruction have been identified (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). For most students simply increasing the amount of independent and instructional level reading will improve fluency and other measures of reading (Allington, 2006, 2014). However, for students who struggle in reading a more intense form of fluency instruction may also be warranted. Elements of a more direct approach to fluency instruction and intervention include

repeated readings Samuels found that repeatedly reading one text not only improved students' reading of that text, it also led to improved reading of other texts not previously encountered. In essence, a transfer of learning and fluency took place from the text practiced to the new text. Subsequent research has demonstrated this effect at a number of different grade levels.

The challenge of repeated readings is to make it an authentic and engaging experience for students. In many commercial programs repeated reading is used primarily as a way to increase students' reading rate. As we noted earlier, we find this to be an odd and disappointing approach to fluency. Where in real life do readers read a text for the purpose of reading it fast?

We think that a more authentic approach to fluency comes in the notion of performing a text. If readers know that they will be performing a text

### Reading Together

The origins of Reading Together (Young, Mohr, & Rasinski, 2015) come from Samuels' repeated reading and Heckelman's (1969) Neurological Impress Method (NIM). In NIM a tutor sits side by side with a learner to read a text together. The pair begins reading aloud with the tutor staying slightly ahead of the learner and reading with appropriate expression. When the learner begins to approximate the tutor's reading, the tutor reads slightly faster and with good expression. Research into various forms of NIM found that it lead to improvements in word recognition, fluency, and overall reading proficiency.

We developed Reading Together as an approach that incorporates the elements of repeated and assisted reading in a way that could easily be implemented by tutors who do not have deep experience in reading instruction and who could be trained in a short period of time. A daily Reading Together lesson incorporates the following steps:

- The tutor selects a text that is approximately eight levels above the student's independent level. The text can be of any type,

including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, or song.

- The tutor and student begin by engaging in NIM, as described previously. Thus, the tutor and student read aloud, while the tutor stays slightly ahead of the student and reads with good expression. In NIM, the tutor and student read the entire text in this manner. However, in Reading Together, the tutor breaks the readings into manageable chunks or sections. With picture books, we recommend reading an entire page, and with novels, the tutor might break the text into paragraphs. If the text is poetry, students might be able to handle the whole poem.
- After using NIM with predetermined selection (page, paragraph or poem), the tutor instructs the student to reread the selection orally. This is the repeated readings component. It gives the student an opportunity to independently read texts that was previously part of an assisted reading.
- After the students reads aloud, the tutor and student engage in NIM for subsequent sections, stopping at the end of each to allow the student to reread the sections orally. We recommend that the process is continued for at least 20 minutes.
- In summary, the tutor and student reads a section of text using NIM first, and then the student rereads the sections aloud. Then the duo repeats the process for 20 to 30 minutes.

### Fluency Development Lesson

Like Reading Together, the Fluency Development Lesson (FDL) (Rasinski, 2010) was developed as a fluency intervention that incorporated the elements of effective fluency instruction mentioned earlier. The intent of the FDL is to provide intensive fluency instruction to a group of students in a relatively short period of time.

Many teachers engage students in an activity where they repeatedly read a poem, song or other short text over the course of a week so that by the end of the week they are proficient in reading it. Because the FDL is primarily intended for students who need more intensive fluency intervention, the week-long practice of a text is shrunk into one day, and each day a new FDL using a new text is employed.

The FDL is a daily (or near daily) lesson in which the goal for students is be able to read a new text well at the end of each lesson. Each lesson requires 20-25 minutes and employs short reading passages (poems, story segments, or other texts) at or above students' instructional level that they read and reread over the short period of time in a variety of different formats. The general outline for the daily lesson follows:

- Students read a familiar passage from the previous lesson to the teacher or a fellow student for accuracy and fluency.
- The teacher introduces a new short authentic text and reads it to the students two or three times with a various levels of expression while the students follow along. Text can be a poem, song, monologue or segment from a trade book, etc.

- The teacher and students discuss the content of the passage and quality of the teacher's oral reading.
- Teacher and students read the passage chorally several times. Various forms of choral reading (e.g., alternate lines, different voices) can be used to add variety and interest.
- The teacher organizes students into pairs or trios. Each student practices the passage two or three times while his or her partner listens and provides support, encouragement, and formative feedback.
- Individuals and groups of students perform their reading for the class or other audience (e.g., a parent stationed outside the classroom acting as an audience of one).
- Because many of the students with fluency difficulties also exhibit difficulties in word recognition and vocabulary a brief word study component completes the lesson. Students and the teacher choose 5 or 10 words from the text to add to the classroom word bank and/or word wall. Students engage in word study activities using the chosen words (e.g. word sorts with word bank words, word walls, flash card practice, defining words, word games, etc.)
- Because home involvement and reading at home are central to student success in reading, the students take a copy of the daily text home to continue to practice. Parents and family members

are encouraged to listen to their student “perform” the text multiple times at home.

Although the intent of the FDL is to improve reading proficiency, another significant benefit of the FDL is in students’ attitude toward and confidence in their own ability to read. At the end of each FDL students are able to fluently read a text that at the beginning of the lesson was a challenge. That sense of daily accomplishment is something that many students who struggle in reading do not often get. With the FDL students feel as if they have accomplished something of value each day.

### Does Intensive Fluency Instruction Lead to Improved Reading?

We have shared with you two approaches to fluency instruction that are simple to implement, can be adapted for use at all grade levels, are time efficient, and require no new materials. Most of all, they appear to be effective in improving student reading outcomes.

Reading Together is becoming a popular method to increase students’ reading fluency (Rasinski & Young, in press; Young & Mohr, in press). We first used Reading Together with two struggling third graders—both students made impressive gains (Mohr, Dixon, & Young, 2012). The students’ success was encouraging, so we began using the method with more students. In 2014, we conducted a 4-week study with 29 elementary students who were identified as disfluent readers. Trained volunteers delivered the daily 20 minute intervention to 29 third, fourth, and fifth graders. After four weeks, each student received approximately 400 minutes of Reading Together. The results indicated that students who received the Reading Together intervention significantly

outperformed the control group in reading expression, automaticity, and overall reading achievement (Young, et al., 2015).

Earlier in this article we shared with you data from a group of 26 students who did not pass a high stakes silent reading comprehension test. Over half the students exhibited difficulties in one or more areas of reading fluency. A six-week intervention was provided for the students where the Fluency Development Lesson was used as the core lesson since so many students seemed to have difficulty in fluency. After receiving the fluency intervention course, students were again tested on the high stakes silent reading test. All students tested demonstrated improvements in reading fluency and only four students failed to pass the test on the second administration; 85% of the students who did not pass the silent reading test on the first administration ended up passing after receiving a 7-week intervention focused on reading fluency.

Large numbers of students who struggle in reading manifest difficulties in fluency. Appropriate and effective fluency instruction can be implemented easily and effectively with these and normal achieving students. The results of such instruction can lead not only to more fluent oral reading, but, more importantly, better comprehension in silent and oral reading. We hope that you, whether you are a classroom reading teacher or a reading interventionist, will consider making or bringing back reading fluency as an important part of your overall reading curriculum. Our students deserve no less.



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