



A Scientific Learning Whitepaper

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Supportive Fluency Instruction: The Key to Reading Success (Especially for Students Who Struggle)

A White Paper for Scientific Learning

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Summary

- New and different reading instruction is needed to address the high percentage of students who do not read proficiently in the US.
- Difficulties in *decoding* and *reading fluency* can be major barriers to proficient reading.
- Because of an emphasis on word recognition/automaticity, instructional methods for fluency have focused on increasing students' reading rate, without regard for expression or comprehension.
- The need for appropriate instruction in word accuracy, speed, prosody and comprehension (without emphasizing speed reading) is sorely needed.
- A reader with good word recognition/automaticity has greater capacity to employ higher-level thinking processes for text comprehension; one who reads with good prosody also comprehends more.
- Best practices for teaching fluency include instructional methods like assisted reading, choral reading, modeled readings, and wide and deep reading practice of authentic texts.
- Don't underestimate the role that fluency plays in reading comprehension—incorporating simple methods can be the missing component of your reading instruction that makes all the difference.

Why Fluency Is Key

Despite significant investments at the national, state, and local levels, we still have students who struggle in achieving proficiency in reading. According to a recent National Assessment of Educational Progress report, approximately 33% of our 4th grade students read at a level considered "below basic." Moreover, over the past twenty years, the percentage of fourth graders identified as "below basic" has remained over 30%. Clearly, new and different ways are needed for delivering effective reading instruction for struggling readers.

What is the source of concern for students who struggle in reading? Although there are a number of areas, Valencia and Buly (2004) found that more than 80% of fifth grade students who scored below proficient on a fourth grade state reading test exhibited difficulties in word identification (word decoding), reading fluency, or both. Given that fifth grade students are more proficient in word identification and fluency than primary grade students (Rasinski 2004), it is likely that the percentage of primary grade students having difficulty in these areas is even higher. Thus, we see that difficulties in word decoding and reading fluency can be major barriers to proficient reading in primary grade students and beyond. Indeed, the Common Core State Standards (2010) identify word recognition and reading fluency as foundational competencies that are necessary for further growth in reading.

Yet, despite its recognized importance, fluency instruction is often severely limited in many classrooms. The actual role or nature of fluency in reading instruction has not been clearly identified. Evidence of this lack of clarity comes from the International Reading Association's annual "What's Hot; What's Not" survey of literacy scholars. In the most recent survey, reading fluency was identified as "not hot" by the experts (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2012). Some scholars have argued that because a component of fluency, word recognition automaticity, is often assessed through reading speed, instructional methods for fluency have evolved

into increasing students' reading rate. Thus, fluency instruction in many cases focuses on reading for speed and timed reading activities, without regard for comprehension. As a result, many teachers and students see fluency only as a quest for speed and have deemphasized fluency instruction in the classroom (Samuels, 2007; Rasinski, 2008; Rasinski, & Hamman, 2010; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). An evaluation of Reading First (Gamse, Bloom, Kemple, & Jacob, 2008) found that less than five minutes per day were devoted to fluency instruction in both Reading First and non-Reading First classrooms. The need for appropriate instruction in word accuracy, speed, prosody and comprehension (without emphasizing speed reading) is sorely needed.

Pikulski and Chard (2005) have described fluency as a bridge from word recognition accuracy to text comprehension. Most scholars agree that reading fluency has two essential components: (1) word recognition that is not only accurate but also automatic or effortless (automaticity), and (2) prosodic or expressive reading (prosody).

Automaticity

Automaticity refers to the ability to read words in text accurately and effortlessly or with minimal attention (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Logan, 1997). As readers become increasingly automatic (as well as accurate in recognizing words), the reader's required attention to word recognition diminishes. As such, the reader has greater capacity to employ higher-level thinking processes for text comprehension. Automaticity in word recognition has been found to be an important component in proficient reading (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2004; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rasinski et al, 2011). But as mentioned earlier, automaticity is often assessed and described in terms of reading speed (Rasinski, 2004). As readers become more automatic in their word recognition, reading speed increases (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010). Versions of Deno's (1985) one-minute Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) in reading have been employed over the past decade to assess automaticity and have been validated through a number of studies (Deno, Mirkin, & Chiang, 1982; Marston, 1989).

Prosody

Prosody is the other critical component of reading fluency and refers to the ability to read orally with appropriate expression or intonation coupled with phrasing that permits and enhances the construction of meaning (Schreiber, 1980). By incorporating natural break points in language when reading connected text, prosody allows the reader to comprehend by holding a meaningful sequence of words in working memory (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010). Readers are thus able to parse meaning using expression and volume, phrasing and intonation, smoothness and pace (Rasinski & Padak, 2005).

In an early paper on fluency, Allington (1983) suggested that prosodic reading approximates "normal speech" (p. 559). Most classroom teachers can assess prosody by simply listening to students' oral reading and assessing the extent to which their reading sounds like normal speech. Several rubrics have been developed for classroom use to assess prosody in reading (Klauda & Guthrie, 2008; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991); these have been shown to be reliable and good predictors of silent reading achievement (Moser, Sudweeks, Morrison, & Wilcox, in press; Paige, Rasinski, & Magpuri-Lavell, 2012; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). Large scale studies have found, too, that fourth grade students who read with good expression, as measured by

rating their oral reading on a prosody rubric, generally exhibit better comprehension in silent reading; and with every decline in oral reading prosody there is a decline in silent reading comprehension (Daane, et al., 2005; Pinnell, et al., 1995). Kuhn, Schwanenflugel and Meisinger (2010) argue that prosody rubrics offer reasonable approaches for classroom teachers to regularly assess students in this component of fluency.

Given the critical role that fluency plays in reading and recognizing that a significant number of students who struggle in overall reading achievement exhibit difficulties in reading fluency (Valencia & Buly, 2004), it is reasonable to expect that instruction in this area may lead to improvements in reading fluency and the more important goal of reading: comprehension.

Teaching Reading Fluency

Several instructional methods have been identified to develop fluency in students (Rasinski, 2010). These methods can readily be incorporated into regular reading instruction as well as intervention instruction for students who have not achieved grade level proficiency in reading.

Model Fluent Reading

Students are more likely to succeed in developing fluency if they have a good sense of what constitutes reading fluency. This can be done by teachers (or other more fluent readers) modeling fluent reading. Reading aloud to students has long been advocated for elementary classrooms for a number of reasons. Students who are regularly read to have larger vocabularies, are better comprehenders, and are more motivated to read than students who are not read to. When reading to students, the teacher can help students notice how she used her voice to enhance the meaning of the text and to make the reading experience more satisfying for students. Students themselves will develop a better sense of what constitutes fluent reading and can aim their own efforts to make their oral reading approximate the reading that is produced by the teacher.

Assisted Reading

In assisted reading, developing readers are supported by more proficient readers during the act of oral reading. In essence, assisted reading involves the developing reader listening to a more fluent rendering of the same text by a more proficient reader. As the developing reader does his best to read the text, he is supported directly by hearing a fluent rendering of the text by his assistant. With some practice, the less fluent reader will eventually be able to read the text without the help of the more fluent assistant.

Assisted reading can take a variety of forms. Perhaps the most ubiquitous form of assisted reading in the primary grades is choral or group reading (Paige, 2011). Less fluent readers are assisted by their more fluent peers (and teacher) who read with them. Paired reading is a more focused approach to assisted reading (Topping, 1987, 1989). As the name implies, paired reading is essentially choral reading with two people, one of whom is a more fluent reader. This more fluent reader could be a classmate, an older student, a teacher, a classroom volunteer, or a parent reading with his or her child at home.

What can a reader do when he or she does not have a person or group to read with? Technology provides an answer. In technology-assisted reading, the reader listens to a more fluent recording of the same text while reading, then is assisted by a program called Reading Assistant™ that “listens” back. In the past, the recorded reading had taken the form of a cassette tape, but there are myriad limitations with this method (cassettes get lost or damaged, it’s not interactive or personalized, etc.). More recently, technology has made technology-assisted reading something that can easily be implemented in classrooms or homes. Indeed, with the advent of digital recording applications (podcasts) teachers are able to create their own library of technology-assisted readings. In other instances, publishers have combined authentic literature with technology-assisted readings of that literature to create actual online software programs for modeled and assisted reading. One of the more unusual forms of assisted reading comes in the form of captioned television. In captioned programs (when the audio volume is on) a television viewer (listener) sees the words on the television screen while simultaneously hearing the words read.

Recent reviews of research have found that assisted reading has great potential for improving students’ fluency and overall reading achievement (Rasinski, et al., 2011). In an early study, for example, Chomsky (1976) found that students who were making minimal progress in reading, despite achieving some proficiency in phonics and word decoding, began making substantial progress when they read text while listening to a recorded version of the same passage.

Practice – Wide and Deep

Conventional wisdom suggests that fluency in any activity requires practice in that activity, whether that activity is driving a car, making a jump shot in basketball, dancing, or learning to read. In reading, we generally think of practice in terms of wide reading. In wide reading practice, students’ volume of reading is maximized by regularly reading new, never-before-read materials. Wide reading is the type of reading practice generally found in classrooms. Students read a story or chapter once, they discuss the chapter with their classmates and teacher, and possibly engage in other extension activities designed to deepen students’ understanding of the text. Once those activities are completed, students move on to another new text to read, discuss, and reflect on.

Clearly, wide reading is a critical part of reading instruction and we want to maximize the amount of independent reading our students engage in. However, consider the students in your classrooms who are not the good readers. They read the text once – they don’t read it or understand it well. If they never get the opportunity to develop mastery over a text, there is a good chance they will not develop as confident and proficient readers. For these students (as well as the normally developing readers), we need to occasionally ask them to read a text multiple times until they are able to read it fluently and with good comprehension. This type of practice is known as repeated or deep reading.

A solid body of research has shown that when students read a text several times with feedback, they not only improve their performance on the practiced text, they also improve on new texts, some of which may be more challenging than the original text (Rasinski, et al, 2011). The importance of repeated reading practice, especially for struggling readers, is well established.

The problem with guided repeated readings is making it purposeful and authentic. Most commercial fluency programs include a repeated readings component, but students in such programs often misinterpret the purpose of the activity. Because growth in reading fluency is often measured by gains in reading speed, students can easily develop the sense that the purpose of the repeated reading is to increase their reading speed. As a result, many students use repeated readings as a vehicle for improving their rate of reading, with minimal regard to the meaning of the text. I feel that this is one of the reasons why reading fluency has been viewed as “not hot” in several of the recent surveys of reading experts in the field (Rasinski, 2012). It may also be the reason why several studies of repeated reading have not demonstrated gains in comprehension from repeated readings practice (Rasinski, et al., 2011).

The “artistic” challenge for teachers is to make repeated readings an authentic and purposeful activity for students. One way to make repeated readings authentic is to make it a performance activity. If students know that they will eventually perform (read orally) the text they are practicing, they have an authentic purpose for their practice or rehearsal – they need to practice the text to the point where they can give a fluent and meaningful rendering of the text to the listening audience. Thus, in such a purposeful context, readers do not aim their practice at sheer speed of reading; rather the purpose of their rehearsal is to make their reading meaningful. Students learn to adjust and manipulate the prosodic aspects of their oral reading (rate, pitch, volume, emphasis, etc.) in order to enhance the listeners’ understanding of what they read. Research into this more authentic form of repeated reading has shown that readers improve in their word recognition, reading rate, prosody, comprehension, and motivation for reading (Rasinski, et al., 2011).

A Word or Two About Text Choice

If performance provides us with an authentic purpose for repeated reading practice, then we need to consider the types of texts that lend themselves to performance. In many current commercial fluency programs, the type of text that predominates is informational. While not denying the importance of informational texts at all grade levels, most informational texts do not lend themselves to oral and expressive reading performance. All one has to do is listen to someone read their informational report at a professional meeting to understand what a challenge it is to read such material in a way that is prosodic, meaningful, and engaging. Informational texts often lack a compelling voice that makes such a text easily adaptable to oral interpretation.

Fortunately there are texts that are easily amenable to oral, expressive reading. Stories or narratives usually have a strong voice that lend themselves to prosodic reading, but other texts are available. These include poetry and rhymes, song lyrics, rhetoric, scripts, dialogues and monologues, personal letters, etc. (Rasinski & Zimmerman, 2013). Interestingly, these types of texts have been deemphasized in schools in favor of more informational and narrative texts. I feel that including these text types in our classrooms not only increases the material that counts as reading for our students, it also provides teachers with a larger array of text choices for instruction. Moreover, I have found that students are highly motivated and take great pride in practicing and performing such texts for an authentic audience, even an audience of one person.

Synthesizing Fluency Instruction

Modeling fluent reading, providing support and assistance while reading, and repeated (and wide) reading are the building blocks of fluency instruction. Each, in their own way, offers students opportunities to move themselves toward more fluent reading. When these individual components can be synthesized or integrated into lesson units, it is likely that students will gain more from such a lesson than if they received instruction in each of the components separately. With the need to accelerate the progress of students who struggle in reading, it seems reasonable to assume that synthesized instruction may offer some advantages that are particularly compelling.

One such synthesized instructional lesson that I had the pleasure of developing is the Fluency Development Lesson (FDL) (Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant, 1994). The FDL is a daily lesson that combines modeling fluent reading, assisted reading, and repeated (and wide) reading that takes no more than 25-30 minutes. The lesson also engages students in brief but intensive word study and in home reading practice, both of which are also considered critical to students reading success. The FDL uses a daily poem or other short text of 50 to 200 words. The goal of each lesson is for students to learn to read one text well. In order to achieve good reading on the daily text, students engage in listening to the text read to them, read it with other readers, and then practice the text repeatedly and eventually perform for an audience. Here is a general outline of a daily FDL lesson:

1. Students read a familiar passage (story segment, poem, song lyric, etc.) from the previous lesson to the teacher or a fellow student for accuracy and fluency.
2. The teacher introduces a new short text and reads it to the students two or three times while the students follow along. Text can be a poem, segment from a basal passage, or literature book, etc.
3. The teacher and students discuss the nature and content of the passage.
4. Teacher and students read the passage chorally several times. Antiphonal reading and other variations are used to create variety and maintain engagement.
5. The teacher organizes student pairs. Each student practices the passage three times while his or her partner listens and provides support and encouragement.
6. Individuals and groups of students perform their reading for the class or other audience.
7. The students and their teacher choose 3 or 4 words from the text to add to the word bank and/or word wall.
8. Students engage in word study activities (e.g. word sorts with word bank words, word walls, flash card practice, defining words, word games, etc.)
9. The students take a copy of the passage home to practice with parents and other family members.
10. Students return to school and read the passage to the teacher or a partner who checks for fluency, accuracy, and comprehension.

The FDL taps into Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) instructional concept of the gradual release of responsibility which suggests that learning best occurs when the teacher initially takes greatest responsibility for the learning task but gradually releases or gives it over to the student with appropriate and declining levels of support. In the FDL, the teacher takes on

initial responsibility for the daily reading by reading the text to and for the students. This is followed by a shifting of responsibility from the teacher to the students as teacher and students read the text together and the eventually the students practice and perform the texts on their own, without assistance from the teacher.

Although the FDL incorporates repeated (deep) reading in each lesson, the FDL also allows for wide reading. Each day a new, never-before-read text, is practiced and performed. Thus, over the course of a week students learn to read a variety of texts fluently and with understanding. Since we find the most of the students who struggle in reading manifest difficulties in reading fluency, we have used the FDL as the core instructional intervention in our university-run reading clinic for struggling readers for the past decade. Used on a regular (daily) basis, we have found students to make remarkable growth in word recognition, reading fluency, and most important, reading comprehension (Zimmerman, Rasinski, & Melewski, 2013).

Final Thoughts

Learning to read is critical to success in life. Yet, we find that we have not made great progress in helping more students achieve the level of literacy development that is necessary for success. The old methods of instruction, I feel, are not sufficient to help those students who find reading difficult. If they were, we should have seen a decline in the incidence of students with reading problems. The truth is, however, that we have not seen much of a change despite significant investments in training and materials for teaching reading.

Reading fluency has been relatively ignored or misinterpreted for years. It is time that we consider new ways of approaching reading instruction for our struggling readers. Reading fluency is one of these approaches that offers great potential for many students. It may not be the answer to all reading problems; nothing is. However, my 30+ years of working with students experiencing difficulty in reading tell me that it can be an answer to many students who find reading difficult and uninteresting. I hope that you will consider making reading fluency a part of your daily classroom instructional routine.

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