

Educational Leadership: Creating Fluent Readers

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A growing body of evidence points to reading fluency as an important factor in student reading success. Fifth grade has turned into a difficult year for Jonah. He is a bright student, but he has difficulty reading. Although he can accurately sound out the words he encounters, he plods along word-by-word, often hesitating at challenging vocabulary. His oral reading shows little attention to punctuation and phrasing, and it lacks expression and enthusiasm. Jonah can, however, understand material read to him. His difficulty seems to lie somewhere on the path from decoding to comprehension—in reading fluency. Since the publication of the National Reading Panel report (2000) and other recent scholarly reviews of scientific research (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003), reading fluency has taken a front seat in discussions about student reading success and effective instruction in reading. Yet programs and materials addressing reading instruction and teacher training seldom tackle reading fluency (Rasinski & Zutell, 1996). This lack may be due to the fact that fluency has long been associated with oral reading, a form of reading traditionally viewed as having little importance in learning to read (Gibson & Levin, 1975; Smith, 2002).

Three Dimensions of Reading Fluency

Defining reading fluency may help clarify the issue. Successful reading requires readers to process the text (the surface level of reading) and comprehend the text (the deeper meaning). Reading fluency refers to the reader's ability to develop control over surface-level text processing so that he or she can focus on understanding the deeper levels of meaning embedded in the text.

Reading fluency has three important dimensions that build a bridge to comprehension. The first dimension is *accuracy in word decoding*. Readers must be able to sound out the words in a text with minimal errors. In terms of skills, this dimension refers to phonics and other strategies for decoding words. The second dimension is *automatic processing*. Readers need to expend as little mental effort as possible in the decoding aspect of reading so that they can use their finite cognitive resources for meaning making (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). The third dimension is what linguists call *prosodic reading* (Schreiber, 1980, 1991; Schreiber & Read, 1980). The reader must parse the text into syntactically and semantically appropriate units. If readers read quickly and accurately but with no expression in their voices, if they place equal emphasis on every word and have no sense of phrasing, and if they ignore most punctuation, blowing through periods and other markers that indicate pauses, then it is unlikely that they will fully understand the text.

Assessing Reading Fluency

Teachers can easily assess each of the three dimensions of reading fluency. To determine proficiency in decoding connected text, calculate the percentage of words a reader can accurately decode on grade-level material. An accuracy level of 90–95 percent is usually considered adequate. Thus, a 3rd grader who is progressing normally in decoding accuracy should be able to read a 100-word text written at a 3rd grade level with no more than 10 uncorrected decoding errors. More than 10 uncorrected errors per 100 words indicates that decoding is a concern, one that requires additional instruction and practice. Teachers can normally assess automaticity in decoding by looking at the student's reading rate. Reading rates increase as students mature, so the target reading rate increases as students move through school. An easy method for determining reading rate, and thus automaticity, involves having students orally read a grade-level passage for 60 seconds and then calculating the number of words read correctly (corrected errors count as words read correctly) (Deno, 1985). Compare students' scores with target rates (oral fluency norms) for each grade level (Rasinski, 2003). Readers who fall 20–30 percent below the target rate will normally require additional instruction.

The best way to assess prosodic reading is to listen to a student read a grade-level passage and to then judge the quality of the reading using a rubric that scores a student on the elements of expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace (see fig. 1, p. 49). Students who score poorly may be considered at risk in this dimension of reading fluency.

Figure 1. Multidimensional Fluency Scale

Use the following rubric (1–4) to rate reader fluency in the areas of expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace.

1. Expression and Volume

1. Reads words as if simply to get them out. Little sense of trying to make text sound like natural language. Tends to read in a quiet voice.
2. Begins to use voice to make text sound like natural language in some in areas of the text but not in others. Focus remains largely on pronouncing the words. Still reads in a quiet voice.
3. Makes text sound like natural language throughout the better part of the passage. Occasionally slips into expressionless reading. Voice volume is generally appropriate throughout the text.
4. Reads with good expression and enthusiasm throughout the text. Varies expression and volume to match his or her interpretation of the passage.

2. Phrasing

1. Reads in monotone with little sense of phrase boundaries; frequently reads word-by-word.
2. Frequently reads in two- and three-word phrases, giving the impression of choppy reading; improper stress and intonation fail to mark ends of sentences and clauses.
3. Reads with a mixture of run-ons, mid-sentence pauses for breath, and some choppiness; reasonable stress and intonation.
4. Generally reads with good phrasing, mostly in clause and sentence units, with adequate attention to expression.

3. Smoothness

1. Makes frequent extended pauses, hesitations, false starts, sound-outs, repetitions, and/or multiple attempts.
2. Experiences several “rough spots” in text where extended pauses or hesitations are more frequent and disruptive.
3. Occasionally breaks smooth rhythm because of difficulties with specific words and/or structures.
4. Generally reads smoothly with some breaks, but resolves word and structure difficulties quickly, usually through self-correction.

4. Pace

1. Reads slowly and laboriously.
2. Reads moderately slowly.
3. Reads with an uneven mixture of fast and slow pace.
4. Consistently reads at conversational pace; appropriate rate throughout reading.

Scores range 4–16. Generally, scores below 8 indicate that fluency may be a concern. Scores of 8 or above indicate that the students is making good progress in fluency.

Adapted from Zutell & Rasinski, 1991. Used with permission.

By having students read one or two grade-level passages for one minute each, teachers can get a quick sense of their students' level of decoding accuracy, automaticity, and prosodic reading. Although such quick assessments may not be definitive, they do provide teachers and school administrators with a method for screening new students, tracking students' ongoing progress in the various dimensions of reading fluency, and identifying the students who may require additional assessment and instruction.

Teaching Reading Fluency

Instruction in reading fluency depends on the area in which students require the most help. Students with difficulties in accuracy require instruction in learning how to decode words. Although teachers are familiar with this kind of instruction, which develops skills in phonics and decoding, they may not be as familiar with methods for developing students' strength in automaticity and prosodic reading. In my own instructional efforts to develop automaticity and prosodic reading, I use *assisted readings* and *repeated readings*, two methods that research has shown to improve reading fluency (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). Students need to hear what fluent reading sounds like and how fluent readers interpret text with their voices.

Hearing fluent reading, however, is not the same as being a fluent reader. Fortunately, assisted readings can help. After reading a passage aloud to students, I ask them to follow along with me, first silently and then aloud, as a group. Sometimes I ask students to orally read a passage with a partner who is at the same reading level. At other times, I ask more fluent readers to read with students who are having difficulty with reading (Eldredge & Quinn, 1988; Topping, 1987a, 1987b, 1995) or I have students silently read while listening to a fluent rendering of the passage on tape (Carbo, 1978; Pluck, 1995). Such practices constitute a powerful strategy for improving fluency and comprehension.

Developing fluency in reading requires practice; this is where the method of repeated readings comes in (Samuels, 1979). Research indicates that repeated readings lead not only to improvement in reading the passage but also to improvement in decoding, reading rate, prosodic reading, and comprehension of passages that the reader has not previously seen (Dowhower, 1994; Koskinen & Blum, 1986; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Passages meant to be read aloud as a performance—poetry, for example, or scripts, speeches, monologues, dialogues, jokes, and riddles—are perfect texts for developing fluency. I see many teachers converting their classrooms into poetry cafés and readers' theater festivals on Friday afternoons to give students the opportunity to perform the assigned texts that they have diligently practiced during the week.

The teacher plays a key role in developing prosodic reading skills by modeling prosodic reading in classroom read-aloud sessions and then discussing the specific oral interpretation that he or she chose. Coaching provides another opportunity for developing these skills by making students aware of their own interpretation of the text and moving readers toward deeper levels of interpretation and meaning. Here are some comments I have heard teachers make while coaching students in oral interpretation.

- “You got all the words right, Thomas, but you read too fast. It was hard for me to follow what you were trying to tell me.”
- “Eliza, the way you made each character sound different in this dialogue was fantastic. It was easy and fun to listen to these characters arguing.”
- “I really like how you paused between sentences. This gave me a chance to think about the author's message. Now think about finding places to pause for just a second more inside longer sentences.”
- “I loved how you made your voice strong and loud in this section. It really told me that this section of the passage was important.”
- “Try slowing down here and making your voice a bit softer. Remember, you're trying to tell me about something mysterious. Tell the story with your voice as well as with the words.”

As assisted and repeated reading, coupled with coaching, become part of the classroom routine, teachers can track changes in students' accuracy, reading rate, and prosodic reading. Jonah, our struggling 5th grade reader, originally read a 4th grade-level passage at 60 words correct per minute and a 5th grade-level passage at 52 words correct per minute. A 5th grader, however, should be reading approximately 100–125 words correct per minute during the first half of the school year. After just two months of working in small groups with a reading teacher for three 40-minute sessions each week, Jonah's reading rate on 5th grade-level passages increased to 84 words correct per minute. His accuracy, prosodic reading, and comprehension improved as well.

Several instructional routines for developing reading fluency show promise for improving reading in all readers. Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (Stahl & Heubach, in press) has students engage in modeled, repeated, and assisted reading of passages from basal readers. The Fluency Development

Lesson (Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant, 1994) uses poetry, monologues, dialogues, speeches, and other performance texts to promote reading fluency. Fast Start (Rasinski, 1995; Stevenson, 2002) promotes early reading fluency through parental involvement.

Confusing Fast with Fluent

The new focus on reading fluency has great potential for improving the reading achievement of all students, particularly those who have not met with great success in reading. I am, however, concerned about how some schools define reading fluency and how some teachers teach it. In some schools, where improvement of the reading rate has become the chief goal of fluency instruction, teachers admonish students to “pick up the pace,” regularly time them on their reading to encourage them to beat their previous scores, and engage students in daily reading exercises that emphasize speed over meaning.

This is a corruption of the concept of reading fluency. If we emphasize speed at the expense of prosodic and meaningful reading, we will end up with fast readers who understand little of what they have read. Fluency instruction leads to impressive gains when it provides regular opportunities for expressive reading through assisted and repeated readings coupled with coaching; it doesn't require explicit reference to reading for speed. Students' reading rates will improve as they become naturally more efficient and confident in their ability to decode words.

Fluency Into the Future

Research (Pinnell et al., 1995) suggests that reading fluency is a crucial factor among 4th grade students, but it can also be an important issue beyond the elementary grades. I recently worked with a group of colleagues from Kent State University to examine the fluency of high school students in an urban setting. We found that variations in the reading fluency of these students accounted for approximately 30 percent of the variance in their performance on Ohio's High School Graduation Test. Clearly, this finding suggests that fluency may be an issue that goes well into the high school years, especially among students from less advantaged backgrounds.

If teachers and school leaders are truly committed to leaving no child behind in reading, then they must actively pursue the goal of reading fluency in elementary and middle school classrooms. Existing scientific research on reading fluency indicates that it is an important factor in reading education and thus should be part of any comprehensive and effective reading curriculum.

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