

**Teaching Reading Fluency to Struggling Readers – Method, Materials, and Evidence**

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On the surface James did not appear to be a poor reader. When he read grade level material he was able to read all the words accurately and he knew the meanings of the words he read. His reading was full of effort – he labored over individual words and read them in a slow and unexpressive manner. He was significantly above average when tested for his overall intelligence and receptive vocabulary. When a passage was read to him, he understood it well. However, when he read it on his own, it was very likely that he would not understand much of what he had just read.

This type of student seemed to defy conventional wisdom or explanation. Good word decoder, high verbal intelligence, good vocabulary, capable of listening and understanding, yet not very able to understand what he read on his own. How could such a reader exist? Unfortunately there are many students who fit James' profile. Could it be that difficulty in reading fluency, as manifested in his slow, labored and unexpressive reading was the explanation for this difficulty?

For years reading fluency was the forgotten stepchild of the reading curriculum. Teachers and reading scholars were interested in readers' ability to decode words accurately, not in readers' ability to decode words automatically and quickly. Teachers and reading scholars were more interested in moving students as quickly as possible into silent reading, not the level of expressiveness that expert readers embed in their oral reading. Slightly over a decade ago Rasinski and Zutell (1996) reported that mainstream reading instruction programs gave scant attention to direct or indirect instruction in reading fluency.

However, with the publication of the Report of the National Reading Panel (2000) as well as other reviews of research on fluency (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; Rasinski &

Hoffman, 2003), reading fluency has emerged as an important component in effective reading instruction for elementary grade students. In terms of assessment, research has found that measures of reading fluency, whether through reading speed or measures of students' prosodic oral reading, were significantly associated with measures of reading comprehension and other more general measures of reading achievement (Rasinski, 2004). Moreover, these research reviews also noted that reading fluency instruction resulted in improvements in students' reading fluency and, more importantly, in their overall reading achievement (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003).

As a result of these efforts, fluency is now viewed alongside phonemic awareness, phonics and word decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension, as a key element in any effective reading instruction program. Fluency may be a particularly salient factor when considering the achievement, or lack of achievement, for struggling readers. Rasinski and Padak (1998) found that among struggling elementary grade readers referred for compensatory instruction in reading, reading fluency was a greater deficit than word recognition or comprehension. Similarly, Duke, Pressley, and Hilden (2004) note that word recognition and reading fluency difficulties may be the key concern for upwards of 90% of children with significant problems in comprehension

Thus, our current thinking on reading fluency is that it is indeed an important factor when considering effective reading programs for students. Moreover, it may be even more of a concern for those students who experience difficulty in learning to read and comprehend what they read.

## Why Direct Instruction in Reading Fluency?

Fluency in any activity is achieved largely through practice – the actor rehearses, the athlete talks about repetitious training drills, “the musician spends time daily practicing pieces that will eventually performed, and the novice driver spends as much time on the road as possible. Often, that practice involves the repetition of a particular line, skill, movement, or composition many times. So too, in reading fluency is achieved through practice – wide reading for some readers, repeated practice of particular pieces for others. Accomplished readers are often able to achieve and maintain their fluency through wide and independent reading. Even young successful readers can move toward higher levels of fluency through independent reading as found in sustained silent reading and its various permutations.

However for many young and struggling readers at all ages, repeated readings seems to be an essential method for achieving fluency. Jay Samuels’ (1979) seminal work on the method of repeated readings found that when students orally practiced a piece of text they improved on their reading of that text – rate, accuracy and comprehension. Such an accomplishment is to be expected. However, he also found that when students moved to new passages, their initial readings of those new pieces were read with higher levels of fluency and comprehension than the initial readings of the previous passage, even though the new passage was as difficult or more challenging than the previous piece. Since Samuels work, other studies have demonstrated the value of repeated readings as an instructional tool for reading fluency and, because reading fluency is related to text understanding, to reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003).

Independent repeated readings might work for readers who are already sufficiently accomplished readers that they are able to evaluate and monitor their own reading. However, for most younger and struggling readers repeated readings need to be under the guidance of a teacher or coach. This is where direct instruction in fluency comes in. In the same way that an actor is guided by an acting coach or director, the athlete by a trainer or coach, the musician by a teacher or conductor, the novice driver by a driving instructor or parent, the young or struggling reader involved in reading fluency instruction needs the assistance and guidance of a teacher. The reader's coach can select appropriate materials, model fluent reading, provide assistance while reading, evaluate progress within and between passages, give encouragement, and celebrate successes.

While on the surface it may seem that the reader develops fluency simply by finding a quiet spot and practicing a text several times through, the reality is that there needs to be a coach to model, guide, and encourage in order to make that practice as valuable as possible. Below we identify the various direct instructional roles taken by a teacher or coach in nurturing reading fluency.

### Model Fluent Reading

Less fluent readers may not know what it means to read fluently. Readers need to develop an internalized model of fluent reading. In the current environment where reading speed has become the proxy for reading fluency, students may think that fluency is nothing more than reading fast. This is clearly a less than optimal conception of fluency; yet many students seem to have gotten it in their heads that fluency is reading fast and they direct their reading efforts to reading as fast as they can. Reading speed

may be an indicator or measure of the automaticity component of fluency, but reading speed is not automaticity and it is not fluency.

The best way to counter the idea that reading speed is fluency and to help students develop the understanding that fluency is reading with meaningful expression and automaticity is for a teacher, parent, or coach to read to students regularly in a fluent manner and then to direct students' attention to how that reading was fluent – what made it fluent. Conversely, the teacher, parent, or coach could read to students in a nonfluent manner (monotone, staccato-like, excessively slow or extremely fast) with a follow-up discussion that focuses on how such a reading was not as meaningful or satisfying as a more fluent rendering of the passage.

### Fluency Coach

Students need to practice, through repeated readings, their own reading as well as listen to fluent readings by others. And practice without feedback may result in students' reinforcing their errors or practicing to achieve the wrong goal (e.g., increase reading speed without regard to expression). Teachers need to take on a direct coaching role as students read orally during fluency instruction. They need to listen to students read and give formative feedback to their reading. Teachers can note particular areas of concern in students reading; give praise for strong efforts, and direct students to read in a particular manner (e.g., read this passage with enthusiasm, with sadness, with boredom, etc.). This sort of coaching helps direct students' attention to areas that will allow them to develop their fluency and use it to increase text comprehension.

In the role of fluency coach, teachers can also monitor students' progress in reading fluency. On a regular and systematic basis, the teacher might record samples of students' oral reading and evaluate the recording for automaticity (reading speed) and prosody (reading expression). Progress or lack of progress can be shown through charting students' performance over time. Analysis of trends can lead to lesson planning that is aimed more precisely at students' needs.

### Assisted Reading

Research into fluency has shown that assisted (also called paired, neurological impress, audio-assisted, or duolog) reading (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003) can have a significantly positive effect on students' fluency. In assisted reading an individual student reads a passage while simultaneously listening to a fluent reading of the same text. The fluent rendering of the text can be a more fluent partner or a pre-recorded version of the reading. In many classrooms teachers set aside a time of each day for students to engage in assisted reading with a coach or peer. In other cases, teachers create a listening center in which students are expected to spend some time each day reading while listening to an audio-taped recording of the book.

These are wonderful examples of how teachers can create classroom conditions and routines for supporting students. However, we think it is also important for the teacher to take on the specific role of fluent reading partner for students with particular needs in fluency. No doubt, the teacher is the most fluent reader in any elementary or middle school classroom. During the assisted reading period the teacher may pair up with an individual, pairs, or small groups of students and read orally with the students as

they read orally on their own. Being integrally involved in such lessons allows the teacher to personally monitor each and every student in her classroom, and to act as a personal model or trainer for students. Even more significantly, by being involved with students in this daily read along routine, the teacher demonstrates first hand to students that fluency is important; so important that she is willing to take time each day, time she could have used for other duties, to read with students in her classroom. That is a very profound message indeed.

### Fluency Materials Collector

Fluency instruction normally involves assisted, repeated (practice or rehearsal) and oral reading. (We must note however, that fluency is also manifested in silent reading through the inner voice that only the reader hears). These activities require resources that may not normally be available in a classroom. The informed fluency teacher, then, must take on the role of text collector and developer to make her classroom ready for fluency instruction.

For example, a teacher may decide to set up a listening center so that students can read books while listening to recorded versions of the book (assisted reading). The teacher needs to acquire the hardware necessary to play the recordings (e.g., tape recorders). More importantly she will have to find or develop the recorded versions of the texts she wishes to stock in the listening center. Fortunately, more and more publishing companies are making recorded versions of texts. However, the teacher may also want to think about recording the passages herself or having some of her students (fluent readers as well as those still working on fluency) record passages after having

practiced them to the point where they can be read fluently (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998).

There is something special about reading a text while listening to a recorded version of the text produced by one's teacher or classmate.

Certain texts lend themselves to practice and oral performance, and these texts are not normally found in great quantities in basal readers and other textbooks. Poetry, songs and song lyrics, rhetoric, plays (usually in the form of readers theater scripts), and other texts written with a sense of the author's voice are among the texts that we find lend themselves most fittingly to fluency instruction. Not only can these texts be read orally and repeatedly, they also lend themselves to oral interpretation where the reader uses his or her voice to convey meaning and emotion.

#### Provide for Performance and Celebration

At its heart, fluency in any endeavor requires practice. Whether you are trying to become fluent with a musical instrument, a sport, writing, or reading, you need to practice your craft in order to become fluent at it. In reading, the practice too often (and unfortunately) involves mundane repeated readings of dry passages that are often informational.

Informed teachers see practice as essential, and attempt to find material that is meant to be performed. If the passage, whether it is a song, script, speech, or poem is meant to be performed, it has to be rehearsed or practiced repeatedly. The performance of a passage makes the practice meaningful to students. They will want to perfect their reading so that the performance is as good as possible.

Teachers, then, need to think about how they can allow students to perform their material. Some teachers use Friday afternoons as a time for a “Poetry Café.” During the last 45 minutes of every Friday, the lights are dimmed and the shades are drawn -- low level lighting is used to create a coffeehouse mood. A bar stool is set up at the front of the classroom, and so is a microphone attached to a karaoke machine. Students are the main audience, but parents, teachers, the school principal, and other classrooms are invited to participate in the poetry readings. A parent may bring in popcorn, drinks, and other appropriate refreshments. Students love the authenticity of the performance and it leads them to rehearse their readings even more diligently – they know they have will be performing for an audience. .

In a similar way, teachers can set up daily or weekly opportunities for students to perform their songs, scripts, or other performance texts. Imagine a weekly song festival, a daily poetry reading (done individually or chorally with groups of students), or a periodic readers theater festival in which groups of students plan and rehearse their scripts for performance for classmates.

#### Manifestations of Direct Instruction in Reading Fluency: Instructional Routines

Perhaps the central role of the teacher in direct fluency instruction is to develop and set in motion instructional routines in which reading fluency is the focus. An instructional routine is simply a set of instructional activities aimed at developing a particular skill in reading that is implemented on a regular schedule, usually on a daily or weekly basis.

Many commercial programs currently exist for teaching reading fluency and are based on the central instructional concept of practice or repeated readings. Most of these programs consist of informational texts that are meant to be practiced until a certain reading rate is attained. We think this is a corruption of effective instruction in reading fluency for several reasons. First, the texts employed, informational texts, do not lend themselves easily to reading fluency development. They are meant to be read silently and they are usually written in a third person disembodied voice, one that does not lend itself to reading with expression (the voice that an author incorporates into his or her written text). We are also concerned that such approaches to repeated readings gives the goal of the rereading mechanistically until the passage can be read quickly. As we mentioned earlier, while speed in reading may be an indicator of automaticity in word recognition, speed is not reading fluency and should not be used as an explicit goal for instruction.

As we mentioned earlier in this paper, we argue again that repeated reading works best when the practice or repeated reading is aimed at recreating the voice of the author who wrote the text – to read with appropriate expression and meaning. Since informational texts do not necessarily lend themselves to expressive renderings, we need to look for other text types of genres that do tend to be written with voice. And to that end, we think of texts such as narrative, poetry, rhymes, scripts, dialogues, monologues, jokes, cheers, song lyrics, oratory, and other such texts as the appropriate materials for authentic and effective fluency instruction.

Given appropriate texts and teacher roles, what might direct authentic fluency instruction look like? The manifestations of direct fluency instruction can be as diverse

as teachers and their styles of teaching. In this section of the paper we share several models of direct and authentic fluency instruction that have proven effective in working with struggling readers.

### Fluency Development Lesson

The Fluency Development Lesson (FDL) is a direct fluency instruction model developed by Rasinski, Padak, Linek, and Sturtevant (1994) for use with students experiencing difficulties in fluency and learning to read. For ten to fifteen minutes per day, students and teachers work with a daily text in which the teacher models reading the text for students and gradually releases responsibility for reading the text from herself to **her** students. Eventually the students perform the text, and engage in word study and further practice of the passage at home. A detailed outline of the FDL is presented in Figure 1. In a yearlong implementation of the FDL in urban second grade classrooms where students were generally experiencing difficulty in learning to read, students doing the FDL regularly and with fidelity made substantial progress in reading fluency and overall reading achievement when compared with their previous year's progress and when compared with students not engaged in the FDL but doing other reading related tasks during the time otherwise devoted to the fluency instruction (Rasinski, Padak, Linek, and Sturtevant, 1994).

-----Insert Figure 1 about here-----

### Fast Start

Fast Start is an adaptation of the FDL and intended for use by parents at home with their beginning readers (Padak & Rasinski, 2005; Rasinski, 1995; Rasinski & Padak,

2004). Parents and their children work with a daily fluency text (chosen by the teacher for its literary and poetry qualities; normally a nursery rhyme or poem). Parents are taught to read the poem to their children several times with their children looking on, read the poem with their children aloud several times, and eventually have their children read the poem to them several times. This repeated and assisted reading is then followed by a brief study of some of the words from the rhyme. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of Fast Start in promoting early reading (Rasinski, 1995). One study in particular, found Fast Start to be most beneficial among children who were struggling the most in acquiring early reading skills (Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005).

In a 12 week implementation of the program at home, Rasinski and Stevenson (2005) report that the most at-risk students engaged in Fast Start made significantly more progress in word recognition and fluency than students not doing Fast Start at home but receiving the same reading instruction in school. In fact, the Fast Start students made nearly twice the gain in fluency (automaticity) than students not engaged in Fast Start.

The teachers in the Fast Start program did play a critical role in teaching the parents the program, supplying the materials, and supporting and encouraging parents in their implementation of the program.

### Fluency Oriented Reading Instruction

Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI) (Stahl & Heubach, 2005) is an instructional fluency model that, like the Fluency Development Lesson, incorporates repeated and assisted (partner) reading. Instead of poetry or other short text selections used in the FDL, the texts employed in FORI are simply the basal reading stories that are

part of the students' regular reading curriculum. This feature made the identification and employment of texts for fluency practice simple for teachers. In FORI a basal reading selection is read to the students by the teacher and then followed by a brief discussion of the story. Students then read the story several times on their own, at home and in school, in various modes (e.g., echo reading with the teacher, alternating pages while reading with a partner, reading alone, as a play). Following several readings of the passage students engage in worksheets and journal work related to the story that had been read under the direction of their teacher.

In a two year implementation study of FORI in 14 second grade classrooms, Stahl and Heubach (2005) found greater than expected growth in reading achievement in every classroom. The average growth in reading achievement was approximately 1.8 years for each year of the study. It should also be noted that a substantial number of students in the study were reading significantly below grade at the beginning of each year of the study. Yet, by the end of the study, only two students were not reading at their assigned grade level. Despite the repetitive reading of basal texts, students and teachers had positive attitudes toward the lesson format.

Stahl and Heubach (2005) point out that the most pronounced effects of FORI were on struggling readers, beginning their second grade year reading above the primer level but below the second-grade level. Although most struggling readers tend to fall progressively behind their normal achieving classmates as time goes on, the students in this study, through fluency instruction manifested in various forms of repeated reading, using normal curriculum materials, were able to catch up and were, except for two students, reading at grade level by the end of second grade. The potential of a dedicated

fluency component in the regular reading curriculum for accelerating reading progress is clearly evident.

### Readers Theater

Lorraine Griffith is a fourth-grade teacher in Buncombe County, North Carolina. As in probably all fourth-grade classrooms around the country, Lorraine has her share of struggling readers. After having heard a presentation by Tim Rasinski on reading fluency, she decided to implement a fluency oriented routine of her own in her classroom that focused on repeated reading and performance of readers theater scripts and other materials meant to be rehearsed and performed for an audience (e.g. speeches, poetry, dialogues) (Griffith & Rasinski, 2005).

Students in Griffith's class would receive a script with appropriate parts highlighted early each week. The scripts were found and developed by the teacher. Many were thematically and topically connected to content students were studying in other areas of their fourth grade curriculum. Students were expected to rehearse the script nightly at home for ten minutes. On Fridays, before lunch, students would rehearse with the other members of their group. During this time Griffith would coach and encourage individual students and small groups. Her coaching emphasized the need to practice the passage in order to communicate meaning through oral expression, phrasing, pausing, and emphasis. On Friday afternoons students would perform their scripts for their classmates and other classroom visitors in a "dinner theater" atmosphere. The routine would begin again the following Monday with another set of scripts.

In only ten weeks of implementation Griffith (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004) noted remarkably positive results in students' reading achievement and in their interest in reading – well above normal expectations. It was this initial success that lead Griffith to continue working and refining this model of authentic practice or authentic material for authentic reasons.

### Singing as Reading

Singing lyrics to songs is a form of reading that is nearly ideal for fluency instruction. Songs are meant to be sung (read) orally and they are meant to be sung (read) repeatedly. It is not unusual for a friend to report to us that they have gotten a song into their head early in the morning and they find themselves singing that very same song throughout the day, unable to clear their mind of the song – its melody and lyrics. This to us is a natural form of repeated exposure to text that will build reading fluency. In the reading clinic at Kent State that Rasinski directs teachers and students sing and read songs repeatedly and regularly over the course of their instruction and with very positive results.

Marie Biggs, Susa Homan, and their colleagues (Biggs, Homan, Dedrick, Minnick, & Rasinski, in press) employed the notion of singing as a vehicle for teaching reading and reading fluency. The routine involved students using a software product that provides natural reinforcement of automaticity through the repeated readings of a song's lyrics. The software, Tune in to Reading (TIR), provides real time, instant feedback for each child. The students used TIR for 30 minutes, three times a week. Through readability levels, songs were matched to each child's instructional reading level. The

teachers' initially directed the children to read the song lyrics silently. By silently reading the words to the songs while they listened to the music the students internalized the rhythm of the language for that particular song.

After the silent (repeated) readings of song lyrics, the students sang the song aloud and recorded their performance. Students were encouraged to sing the song aloud three times and then save the recording of their best rendition.

In the initial middle school study (Biggs, et.al, in press) the treatment group gained over a year and a half in overall reading achievement in 9 weeks. Even though students stopped using the program at the end of 9 weeks, the researchers conducted a sustainability assessment at the end of the school year (four months after the study ended). The students using TIR experienced an additional 5-month gain in instructional reading level. Scores after 9 weeks and at the end of the school year demonstrated significant student improvement. Control students' scores evidenced no significant growth.

These results provided the impetus for an expanded study (2005-2006) involving 326 students in 3 school districts at elementary, middle and high school levels (Homan, Biggs, Bennett & Minick, unpublished manuscript). The time frame and routines from the first study were continued in the expanded study. At all grade levels, at all sites, treatment students consistently made a minimum of a full year instructional level gain in the 9-week implementation. Control students had alternative reading experiences while treatment students used TIR. Again all treatment gains were significant, however control students at all levels and all sites evidenced no significant growth.

The use of this interactive singing software not only significantly increased overall instructional reading level for students, it also provided significant improvement in fluency, word recognition and comprehension.

As we previously mentioned, students need to develop the understanding that fluency is reading with meaningful expression and automaticity. TIR provides another positive example of how informed teachers can create classroom conditions and routines for supporting their students' fluency development. This software's use of singing for practice and performance is another example of authentic practice for authentic reasons.

### Discussion

In our quest to accelerate the progress of struggling readers, curriculum and materials developers have too often come up with approaches to instruction that do not even resemble authentic reading done outside of school. Students work on individual reading skills until a certain level of proficiency is achieved, at which time they work on the next reading skill, with little attention given to how these various parts come together in real life reading. We see this mechanization of the reading process beginning to be applied to a great hope in reading – reading fluency. While we are firm believers in direct and intensive instruction for students who need it, we continually ask the question: direct and intensive instruction in what form and for what purpose? Much too often we have seen the answer to that question in relation to fluency to be: read informational text for the main purpose of reading it ever more quickly. For the first time in our careers we now see children, mostly struggling readers, ask us if they should read an assigned text “as fast as they can.”

Reading fluency has been identified as a key component in reading and learning to read. Moreover, a large number of students who experience difficulty in reading manifest difficulties in reading fluency. The keys to the development of reading fluency include modeling fluent reading for students and providing students repeated reading practice of written passages, while at the same time providing assistance and coaching in the repeated reading. Rather than have students involve themselves in a mechanistic form of repeated readings for which the main goal is reading fast, we feel that a more authentic approach to repeated readings and fluency development is called for, especially for readers who struggle. This more authentic approach involves the use of materials that are meant to be read orally and performed for an audience. With such materials readers do not practice reading a text to improve their reading speed; rather they practice a text to recreate the voice of the author so that an audience listening to the performance of the text read aloud will more fully appreciate the meaning that is embedded in the voice of the reader. Not only does such an approach to fluency instruction work, as the field-based research we have summarized in this article demonstrates, the use of materials such as poetry, song, scripts and the like will help students develop a love of and appreciation for the written language that is not always present in other forms of written discourse.

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## Figure 1

### The Fluency Development Lesson (FDL)

The FDL employs short reading passages (poems, story segments, or other texts) that students read and reread over a short period of time. The format for the lesson is:

1. Students read a familiar passage from the previous lesson to the teacher or a fellow student for accuracy and fluency.
  2. The teacher introduces a new short authentic text *with voice* (meant for rehearsal and performance) 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 and accuracy.
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