



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Chapter 8: Fluency

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Chapter 8

Fluency

TERMS TO KNOW

Automaticity	Results when words are recognized immediately without having to decode sounds or syllables
Fluency	The ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with expression
Prosody	Interpreting cues such as punctuation, italics, and boldface words with appropriate pauses, stops, intonation, and pitch variation
Rate	The speed of reading

(NRP, 2000; Osborn & Lehr, 2003; Encarta World English Dictionary; Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002)

WHY SHOULD MIDDLE SCHOOL READING TEACHERS FOCUS ON FLUENCY?

Fluency is said to be the bridge between word recognition and comprehension (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2004). Slow and laborious reading is frustrating for secondary students and often leads them to avoid reading altogether (Rasinski et al., 2005).

There is a correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension, so in addition to instruction in comprehension strategies, teaching students to read fluently may help them better understand what they read (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001). If students spend most of their effort focused on word recognition or reading one word at a time without phrasing, their ability to comprehend text is compromised. Fluent readers at the middle school level display the following characteristics:

- Read 100–160 words per minute.
- Have automatic word recognition skills.
- Group words into meaningful phrases or chunks.
- Read with expression.
- Make few word identification errors and usually self-correct when they do make errors.
- Understand what they read.

The goal of fluency instruction is to train students to read effortlessly. Students who read effortlessly are free to focus on comprehending text because they do not have to wrestle with words (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002). It is important to note that effortless reading does not solely refer to how quickly a student reads the words on the page. A student may be able to read a passage very quickly, but may not necessarily decode words accurately or understand what he or she is reading (Rasinski et al., 2005). Similarly, a student may be able to read every word correctly, but if the student is not reading with **automaticity**, he or she will not be able to understand the ideas behind the words (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002). In order to bridge the gap between word recognition and comprehension, improved **rate** or speed of reading must be accompanied by high accuracy and appropriate expression.

CAVEATS ABOUT ORAL READING FLUENCY IN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Many of the guidelines about monitoring students' progress and establishing benchmarks in oral reading fluency for older students with reading difficulties are based on research with younger children in grades 1–4. Considerably less is known about fluency practices for older students. Consider the following when interpreting fluency rates with older students:

- The most important outcome for students is that they can understand and learn from the text they read. If students have below-average fluency but demonstrate average or above comprehension, it may not be appropriate to spend considerable time on improving their rate of reading.
- Students who read above 90–100 WCPM with 90 percent accuracy in grade-level text may benefit from time spent on enhancing their background knowledge, vocabulary, and/or comprehension rather than on fluency instruction.
- Consider the individual needs of adolescent learners, their interest in reading, and their motivation to learn as you interpret oral reading fluency scores and develop interventions.

WHAT TYPE OF INSTRUCTION WILL HELP MY STUDENTS IMPROVE THEIR FLUENCY?

Select Appropriate Text

The first step in planning fluency instruction is to select appropriate text to use for instruction. Refer to the steps suggested in the Assessment chapter of this book to find each student's accuracy level. Remember, a student's accuracy level can be found by using the following formula and accompanying guidelines in Figure 98:

Number of words read correctly in one minute divided by total number of words read = Accuracy level

FIGURE 98. ACCURACY GUIDELINES.

Independent Level	
≤ 1 in 20 words is difficult	95%–100% accuracy
Instructional Level	
≤ 1 in 10 words is difficult	90%–94% accuracy
Frustration Level	
Difficulty with ≥ 1 in 10 words	$\leq 90\%$ accuracy

If you ask your sixth-grade student Maria to read a 150-word passage on the sixth-grade level and she makes 10 errors while reading, her accuracy is 93 percent ($140 \text{ WCPM} / 150 \text{ WPM} = .93$). This tells you that sixth-grade material is at Maria’s instructional level. This is an appropriate level for fluency instruction.

Modeling and Repeated Reading

Students need to hear explicit models of fluent reading. A teacher, parent, tutor, student, cassette tape, or computer program can provide this modeling.

When you model reading a passage fluently, remember to:

- Read with expression and **prosody** (an understanding of phrasing and the cues provided by punctuation).

HELPFUL HABIT | Explain prosody to your students by saying, “I paused here because there is a comma” or, “The question mark tells me to raise my voice a little at the end of this sentence”.

- Demonstrate combining words into meaningful phrases.
- Demonstrate how to sweep your finger under words and phrases instead of pointing to each individual word as you read.
- Have students engage in setting goals and measuring fluency.

Repeated Reading with Corrective Feedback

The majority of fluency research has focused on elementary students. There is still a great need for further fluency studies with secondary struggling readers, but based on what we know about teaching young readers to be fluent, we can provide direct fluency instruction to our older readers. The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) found that guided repeated oral reading practice has “a significant and positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension across a range of grade levels” (p. 12). Your fluency instruction should include:

- Explicit modeling of fluent reading.
- Teacher or student support with corrective feedback.

- Opportunities for students to read text multiple times.
- Oral reading practice.
- Regular monitoring of student progress.

Several repeated reading strategies include all of the above elements. Descriptions of the most promising fluency strategies for secondary struggling readers are provided on the following pages.

Partner Reading

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Based on Delquadri, J., Greenwood, C. R., Whorton, D., Carta, J. J., & Hall, R. V. (1986). Classwide peer tutoring. *Exceptional Children*, 52, 535–542; Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L. S., Mathes, P. G., & Simmons, D. C. (1997). Peer-assisted learning strategies: Making classrooms more responsive to diversity. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34, 174–206; Greenwood, C. R., Delquadri, J. C., & Hall, R. V. (1989). Longitudinal effects of classwide peer tutoring. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81, 371–383; Mathes, P. G., Torgesen, J. K., Allen, S. H., & Allor, J. H., (2001). *PALS: Peer-assisted literacy strategies*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West; and Topping, K. (1987). Paired reading: A powerful technique for parent use. *The Reading Teacher*, 40, 608–614.

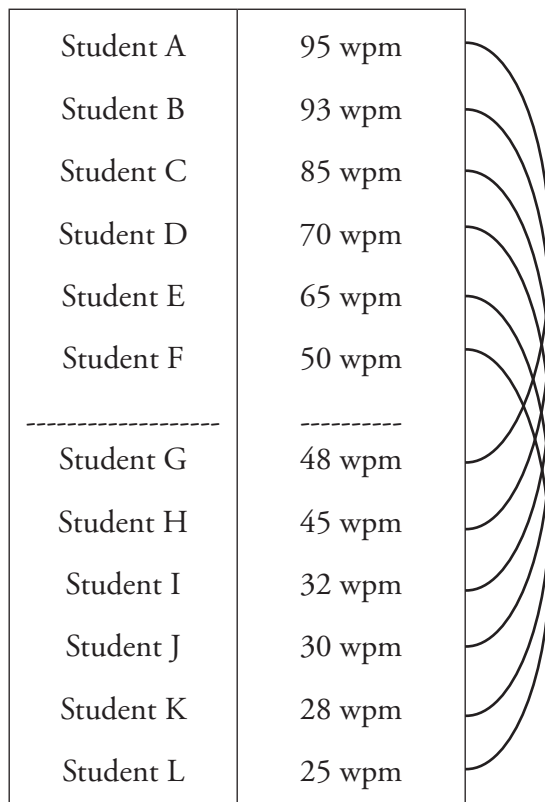
ASSIGN PARTNERS

In partner reading, students read and reread text with partners. One way to assign partners is to make a list of all students in the class, with the highest-level reader at the top and the lowest-level reader at the bottom. Next, divide the list in half. The highest-level reader will be partnered with the top student on the bottom half of the list. The next student on the top half will be partnered with the next student on the bottom half and so on. See Figure 99 for an example. This is one way to assign partners. For some older readers, rotating pairs frequently has been shown to be an effective way to keep students motivated (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Kazdan, 1999). There is more than one way to assign partners. Knowing your students' personalities and reading levels is the key to having a productive partner reading time. It is fine to rotate partners when needed.

Things to consider when rotating partner assignments:

- Assign a higher-level reader with a somewhat lower-level reader. The higher-level reader will model fluent reading.
- Consider the personality of your students.
- Choose text that is on the instructional level of the lower-level student.

FIGURE 99. POSSIBLE METHOD FOR ASSIGNING READING PARTNERS.



TEACH THE PROCEDURE

It is very important to model and teach the partner reading procedure. You can model the procedure with a student or another adult, or you can show a videotape of two students working together. It is essential that students see the procedure in action and are allowed to practice the steps before they are expected to work together independently. When they are proficient, you will be able to focus on working with individual pairs, giving corrective feedback and progress monitoring. Use the steps of effective instruction to teach the partner reading routine. First model what you want students to do. Then provide guided and independent practice. When students fail to follow the routine appropriately, rather than reprimanding them, simply reteach the procedure—model, provide guided practice, and provide independent practice.

PARTNER READING ROUTINE

1. Partner 1, usually the higher-level reader, reads first paragraph. Partner follows along.
2. Partner 2, usually the lower-level reader, reads the same paragraph.
3. Students briefly discuss what they just read by retelling what happened or by identifying the main idea of the paragraph. They can identify the main idea by asking each other: “Who or what was the paragraph mainly about?” and “What was the most important thing about the ‘who’ or the ‘what?’”
4. Repeat steps 1–3 until passage is complete.

(Klingner et al., 2001)

CORRECTION PROCEDURES

- If a student reads a word incorrectly, skips a word, or does not know a word, his/her partner will point to the word and say, “What is this word?”
- If the student reads the word correctly, the partner says, “Yes, that word is _____. What word? Please reread the sentence.”
- If the student does not know the word, the partner says, “That word is _____. What word? Please reread the sentence.”
- The student repeats the word and is asked to reread the sentence.

(Carnine, Silbert, Kame'enui, & Tarver, 2004; Mathes et al., 2001)

Your students will also need several opportunities to practice the correction procedure with you and with each other. If you, as a teacher, use this exact procedure for correcting during whole-class instruction, your students will pick up the procedure quickly.

The following sample lesson teaches the partner reading routine. It is essential to teach and reteach this routine until the procedure becomes habit. Once the partner reading routine is established, students are able to follow the procedure independently. Thus, transition time is reduced, lessons move at a quick pace, and students feel a sense of security by knowing exactly what is expected of them. You may want to provide students with cards to cue them to follow the partner reading routine.

Readers' Theatre

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Worthy, J., & Broaddus, K. (2002). Fluency beyond the primary grades: From group performance to silent independent reading. *Reading Teacher, 55*, 334–343.

INTRODUCTION

Readers' theatre involves students in extensive practice and rehearsal of scripted material to be performed for a group. By the time struggling readers reach middle school and high school, they have probably had several unsuccessful, or “bad,” experiences reading in front of their peers. Readers' theatre can provide older struggling readers with an opportunity to be successful at reading. This experience may lead to greater student confidence, motivation, and, because of the extensive practice required, improved oral reading fluency (Rinehart, 1999). As with any new activity, you will need to model, or demonstrate, what a readers' theatre performance may look like. It would be beneficial to develop a criteria chart with the class to be used for all performances. Criteria may include but not be limited to:

- Readers speak clearly and use an appropriate volume.
- Readers read the text accurately.
- Readers read the text with expression.
- Members of the group cooperate with each other during rehearsal time.
- The group uses their rehearsal time wisely.

PROCEDURE

Select Material to Read

Scripted material can be developed from children's books, poetry, song lyrics, plays, stories, or novels with rich dialogue.

Develop the Script

Assign dialogue to different characters or voices in a story, novel, or poem. Highlight each role so that each student has a copy of the script with his or her role highlighted.

Assign Roles

Readers' theatre groups can be as small or as large as needed. It will probably work best to keep groups small at first. When students become confident with the process of rehearsing and performing, you may assign scripts with a larger number of performers.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Allow students ample time to practice and rehearse their script. This repeated practice of familiar text is necessary to improve oral reading fluency to prepare for the “performance” when they read for the class or others. According to Rasinski et al. (2005), “when students are asked to perform for others, they have a natural inclination and desire to practice the passage to the point where they can read it accurately, with appropriate rate, and especially with meaningful expression and phrasing” (p. 26).

Perform

Students are expected to read the text, not just recite their lines from memory. Students may perform for the class, for another class, or for younger students. When students become comfortable with performing, they may want to prepare a piece to perform for parents or for a school assembly.

Discuss

After every performance, discuss with the group and the class the strengths of the performance. Also, give suggestions and have students offer suggestions for improving the performance.

Tape-assisted Reading

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Adapted from Chomsky, C. (1978) When you still can't read in third grade: After decoding, what? In S. J. Samuels (Ed.), *What research has to say about reading instruction*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

INTRODUCTION

Tape-assisted reading requires students to read along with a tape recording of a fluent reader. As a teacher, you may want to record yourself reading fluently, or you may choose to purchase one of several fluency programs that provide a tape-recorded or a computer-generated fluent reader. Some prerecorded tapes are purposefully recorded at different levels of fluency, with each reading becoming increasingly fluent. Thus, students are more likely to be able to keep up with the initial rate and to read along with the tape at higher levels of fluency with practice. When students are engaged in tape-assisted reading, it is essential that they actually read along with the tape in a quiet voice rather than simply listening to the tape. Students must be monitored carefully and continually.

Before the activity begins, set fluency goals with each student. For example, one student's goal may be to read 100 words per minute (wpm) with fewer than three mistakes, while another student's goal may be to read 70 wpm with fewer than five mistakes. Each student's goal will depend on the level of difficulty of the passage they are reading and their current oral reading fluency level. Students should be involved in setting goals and maintaining their own oral reading fluency charts. See the Assessing Reading Fluency section of Chapter 2: Selecting and Administering Assessments for a discussion of oral reading rates.

PROCEDURE

While listening to a fluent reader read the text on tape, students read aloud softly along with the tape.

Students continue to practice with tape support until they are able to read the text independently. This may be followed with one to three readings without the tape.

Students signal the teacher when they are confident that they can meet their fluency goals.

The teacher times the students reading independently for 1 minute. The teacher then helps the students graph how many words they read correctly and reviews any mistakes.

Progress Monitoring

The most efficient way to measure fluency is to give a Curriculum-Based Measurement Oral Reading Fluency assessment (CBM/ORF). Originally developed in 1985 by Stanley Deno at the University of Minnesota, a CBM/ORF assessment requires little time to administer. During a CBM/ORF measure, a student is asked to read a passage for 1 minute while the teacher marks mistakes. The teacher then determines the student's words correct per minute (WCPM) by subtracting the errors from the total number of words read in one minute. See the Assessing Reading Fluency section of Chapter 2: Selecting and Administering Assessments for directions for administering a CBM/ORF assessment.

Keeping track of progress on a fluency chart (see Figure 100) can be motivating for older students. Goals may need to be modified based on student progress. If a student is not making sufficient progress, he or she may need more fluency practice using one of the approaches described above. Also, it may be well worth your time to teach the partner reading routine to a parent or older sibling of a student. This way, the student can receive additional practice at home.

FIGURE 100. FLUENCY CHART.

