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HotSheet 3: Effective Practices for Reading Fluency



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Fluent reading is one of the hallmarks of skilled readers, and, since the publication of the National Reading Panel report (2000), it has received considerable attention as a central component of the reading process. When reviewing the role that fluency actually plays in reading development, it quickly becomes apparent that this attention is well deserved. What may be less apparent, however, is how teachers and others who work directly with students can easily integrate effective approaches to oral reading instruction into their curricula.

In this Hot Sheet, I address fluency in connected text, rather than word lists; this distinction is critical if learners are to become fluent readers. Although reading words in lists can help develop speed in isolation, fluent reading of connected text is more important. One of the goals of reading aloud is to make the print sound like natural speech and, of course, it is much easier to make connected text sound natural than it is to make unconnected lists of words sound natural.

What is Fluent Reading and Why is it Important?

Fluent reading incorporates three primary elements: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; National Reading Panel, 2000), each of which is crucial to skilled reading. Further, by looking at these elements individually, it becomes possible to identify the role that each plays in students' developing ability to read. To construct meaning from text, it is essential that students accurately identify the vast majority of the words they encounter in print (for example, texts are considered to be at a reader's independent level when they are read with approximately 98% accuracy). **CAUTION:** Although accurate word recognition is necessary for skilled reading, it is not sufficient. In fact, if students need to expend significant amounts of effort figuring out individual words—even if they do so with a high percentage of accuracy—they are unlikely to have enough attention remaining to focus on the meaning of what they are reading. As a result, it is necessary for learners' word recognition to become automatic, as well as accurate, in order to comprehend text (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

The final indicator of fluent reading is prosody (e.g., Erikson, 2003). Prosody consists of those elements that allow oral reading to sound expressive; these include the use of appropriate phrasing, the placing of stress on certain words in order to convey shades of meaning, and the changing of pitch when encountering certain types of questions. These subtle aspects of reading, sometimes—though not always—indicated through punctuation, allow students to demonstrate their ability to construct meaning from the text. Ultimately, it is the integration of these elements, along with accuracy and automaticity, into learners' oral reading that allows them to see themselves as fluent readers.

Fluency Facts

Fluency develops in a relatively regular fashion. In order to monitor the progress of students, I suggest using correct words read per minute and an oral reading fluency scale. Tables 1 and 2 provide guidelines for evaluating student performance.

See Tables 1 and 2 on page 2

Table 1 Student Fluency Rates in Correct Words Read per Minute

GRADE	FALL (WCPM)	WINTER (WCPM)	SPRING (WCPM)
1	--	10-30	30-60
2	30-60	50-80	70-100
3	50-90	70-100	80-110
4	70-110	80-120	100-140
5	80-120	100-140	110-150
6	100-140	110-150	120-160
7	110-150	120-160	130-170
8	120-160	130-170	140-180

From: Rasinski, T. V. (2004). *Assessing Reading Fluency*. Honolulu: Pacific Resources for Education and Learning. Available at http://www.prel.org/products/re_/assessing-fluency.htm

Table 2 National Assessment of Educational Progress's Oral Reading Fluency Scale

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION
Level 4	Reads primarily in larger, meaningful phrase groups. Although some regressions, repetitions and deviations from text may be present, these do not appear to detract from the overall structure of the story. Preservation of the author's syntax is consistent. Some or most of the story is read with expressive interpretation.
Level 3	Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrase groups. Some smaller groupings may be present. However, the majority of phrasing seems appropriate and preserves the syntax of the author. Little or no expressive interpretation is present.
Level 2	Reads primarily in two-word phrases with some three- or four-word groupings. Some word-by-word reading may be present. Word groupings may seem awkward and unrelated to larger context of sentence or passage.
Level 1	Reads primarily word-by-word. Occasional two-word or three-word phrases may occur—but these are infrequent and/or they do not preserve meaningful syntax.

From NAEP's oral reading fluency scale. (1995). *Listening to Children Read Aloud, 15*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Fluency Practices that are Less Effective

Teachers are sometimes tempted to use techniques that are appealing, but that have little benefit for learners. Table 3 describes some of these less-effective practices.

Table 3: Less-effective Practices

PRACTICE	EXPLANATION
Round Robin Reading	Amount of reading completed by each student is too brief to provide adequate instruction or evaluation of material. Forces students to read aloud from unpracticed text in front of peers. Instructional level of material is often inappropriate for many students (Opitz, & Rasinski, 1998).
Variations of Round Robin Reading (e.g., popcorn, popsicle, combat reading)	Amount of reading completed by each student is too brief to provide adequate instruction or evaluation of material. Forces students to read aloud from unpracticed text in front of peers. Instructional level of material is often inappropriate for most students (Ash & Kuhn, 2006).

Fluency Practices that are More Effective

In contrast to the less-effective practices, research has helped identify many techniques that are more beneficial for students. Table 4 identifies these more-effective practices.

Table 4: More-effective Practices

PRACTICE	EXPLANATION
Use of challenging text (materials at about an 85-90% accuracy rate on initial reading).	If sufficient scaffolding is provided, students can meet the demands of reading higher level text. Using these materials with appropriate scaffolding helps students to focus and feel challenged but also successful. It further provides them with exposure to vocabulary and concepts usually reserved for their peers who are more skilled readers (Stahl & Heubach, 2005; Stahl, 2008).
Echo reading	Provides the greatest amount of scaffolding. Teacher initially reads short section of text (e.g., one-two sentences) first and students read after. As the students develop comfort with the procedure, the length of text should be expanded (e.g., a paragraph depending on the length of the text). Teacher provides model of word identification, pace, and use of expression. Teacher can interject comprehension activities before, during, and after the reading. Provides great deal of practice of fluent reading (Meisinger & Bradley, 2008).
Choral reading	Provides lesser amount of scaffolding than echo reading but still gives students a model of fluent reading. Teacher and students read text together. Teacher can interject comprehension activities prior to, during, and after the reading. Provides great deal of practice of fluent reading (Meisinger & Bradley, 2008).

Table 4 continued on page 4.

Table 4: More-effective Practices (cont.)*Table 4 continued from page 3.*

PRACTICE	EXPLANATION
Partner reading	Provides opportunity for students to practice a previously read challenging text or to read a new instructional or independent level text. Students should take turns reading a paragraph or a page to one another and provide each other with positive support and feedback. If time is available, they can read through the text a second time with the students reading opposite pages to those they read originally (Meisinger & Bradley, 2008).
Reading-while-listening	Provides model of competent reader. Student reads along while listening to a competent reader on tape, CD, or digital recording. Practices section of text until it can be read fluently. Provides extended and individualized practice (Chomsky, 1978).

Common Components of Effective Fluency Practices

One of the most important things teachers can do for learners who are experiencing difficulty with the transition to fluent reading is to provide them with opportunities to read significant amounts of scaffolded, connected text (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). This is true for students who are making the transition to fluency at a developmentally appropriate period (e.g., second and third grade) as well as for students who have experienced difficulty with this transition for several years (grades four and beyond). Because disfluent readers often expend disproportionate amounts of energy on their word recognition, they have difficulty moving beyond word-level understanding and progressing toward the comprehension of larger sections of text. By helping students develop their automaticity, it is possible to help them free up their attention so that they can construct meaning as they read. Similarly, a focus on prosody will assist learners develop their understanding of texts. Below are several elements that effective fluency practices have in common.

- **Model fluent reading.** It is important that you model expressive reading for your students and assist them with prosodic elements such as determining phrasal boundaries, where stress should be placed, and how other aspects of prosody should be applied to text (Rasinski, 2003).
- **Extended opportunities for practice.** Students can make gains as long as they actually read connected text for an extended period of time (Heibert, 2004).
- **Use of challenging material.** Texts should be challenging to students (about an 85-90 accuracy rate on initial reading). This material exposes students to a more extensive vocabulary and range of concepts than would be available from instructional level texts (Stahl & Heubach, 2005).
- **Scaffolded reading of a wide-range of texts.** The reading of multiple texts, with support, provides students with the type of practice that assists them in developing their automaticity and prosody. This growth also appears to transfer to previously unread texts. Further, it has been shown in recent research to be somewhat more effective than repetition for fluency development (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2008).
- **Repeated practice of same text.** By providing students with the opportunity to read a single passage multiple times, repeated reading helps to improve learners' automatic word recognition along with their use of appropriate expression. Further, it seems that the gains developed from the practiced passages will transfer to previously unread texts, thereby improving your learners' fluency on new material as well (Stahl & Heubach, 2005) or (Rasinski, 2003).

References and Resources

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