

FLUENCY - "The Forgotten Reading Strategy"

I was a pretty good reader in Grade Two. I looked forward each day to Round Robin Reading Time, when I could dazzle my classmates with dramatic renditions of the adventures of Dick, Jane and Sally. Unfortunately, I rarely got the opportunity. That honour was reserved for kids like David, who "needed the practice". So, day after day, the whole class sat and listened while David and others read aloud, word by painful word. I'm not sure it made any of us better readers. It certainly didn't make us want to read more.

When I became a teacher, I resolved to eliminate this painful and pedagogically unsound practice of "Round Robin Reading". But, without an alternative to replace it with, I essentially eliminated oral reading altogether. And the metaphorical baby which I threw out with this bathwater was an emphasis on fluency. After all, it's pretty difficult to assess reading rate and accuracy, much less expression, when a person is reading silently. And, I reasoned, as long as my students could comprehend the texts, did it even matter whether they could read them fluently?

Fluency Does Matter

Well, I've since learned that fluency *does* matter. Research tells us that the ability to read quickly, accurately and with appropriate intonation is closely linked to comprehension. We know that effective readers, even at the earliest levels, read in five to seven word phrases rather than word by word (Allington, 2001). Nonfluent readers, on the other hand, devote so much effort and energy to decoding individual words that they essentially have no working memory left to devote to comprehension and interpretation. Word by word decoding "slows down the [reading] process and takes up valuable resources that are necessary for comprehension" (NRP, 2000, p. 3-8).

When readers read slowly, they read less. Because it takes them longer to read a text, they experience less reading volume than those who are faster readers. We know that fluent readers read more (Rasinski, 2000). We can assume that the reciprocal is true: the more readers read, the better readers they will become. The Report of the National Reading Panel (2000) states that "there is ample evidence that one of the major differences between poor and good readers is the difference in the quantity of total time they spend reading" (3-10).

There are other repercussions to slow reading, according to Rasinski (2000). Picture, for example, a Grade Five classroom in which the students have been assigned to read a chapter in their science textbooks. The slow reader notices that everyone around him has completed the reading when he is only halfway through. Does he keep plodding along, hoping that no one will notice that he's the last one done? More likely, he skims through the last half of the chapter, or skips it all together.

Why do some readers read slowly and hesitantly? Some teachers believe that nonfluent reading is caused by an inadequate sight word vocabulary and weak decoding skills. Yet studies of struggling older readers indicate that they often have better vocabularies and more phonics knowledge than younger fluent readers (Allington, 2000). Often, nonfluent reading is not a result of a lack of phonics, but an over-reliance on phonics. Nonfluent readers tend to sound out every word, letter by letter. They may read nonsense words without stopping to self-correct. And if something doesn't make sense to them, they simply stop and wait for help rather than trying other strategies.

That is not to say that good readers don't need to decode unfamiliar words. Good readers also use phonics, but as only one tool in their repertoire of strategies. Their decoding tends to be smooth and automatic, seeking out chunks and patterns in words rather than "sounding out" letter by letter. Because decoding is less laborious, fluent readers have enough cognitive resources available to comprehend and interpret at the same time. This enables these readers to monitor their own comprehension as they read, rereading and cross-checking if something doesn't make sense.

<i>Fluent readers are more likely to...</i>	<i>Nonfluent readers are more likely to...</i>
<i>...read with speed, expression and phrasing</i>	<i>... read hesitantly, word by word</i>
<i>... decode words by patterns and chunks</i>	<i>... sound out words letter by letter</i>
<i>... flexibly use a variety of strategies</i>	<i>... use phonics exclusively as the cueing strategy</i>
<i>... be expected to self-correct</i>	<i>... be interrupted whenever they make a miscue</i>
<i>... monitor their own comprehension</i>	<i>... rely on the teacher to prompt</i>
<i>... go back and reread and cross-check if it doesn't make sense</i>	<i>... read on whether it makes sense or not</i>

Allington (2000) suggests that, in many cases, nonfluent reading may be a conditioned behaviour, unwittingly perpetuated by teachers! He reports that teachers are quicker to interrupt struggling readers when they make a miscue. Struggling readers are more often stopped and told to "sound it out" before they even have a chance to notice their own errors. As a result, these readers become even more hesitant about their own reading, waiting at each word to be told they've done something wrong. "When struggling readers grow used to a steady stream of rapid external interruptions, they begin to read with an anticipation of interruptions" (Allington, 2000, p. 74). They also learn to rely on the teacher to tell them when they've made a mistake rather than learning to monitor their own reading.

The good news about "dysfluency" is that it is not a permanent affliction. Fluency can be taught and practiced through a variety of classroom practices.

What can teachers do?

- 1. Provide appropriate level reading materials*
- 2. Establish a supportive environment*
- 3. Teacher modeling*
- 4. Repeated reading with feedback*
- 5. Development of a repertoire of self-monitoring and word solving strategies*

We all struggle with reading when the text is too difficult for us. What if you had to read a complicated technical manual on rocket science? You might struggle with some of the vocabulary. You'd probably have to go back and reread frequently to get the gist of the material. Even then, you might not comprehend it all. Ensuring that our students have access to texts that are at an appropriate reading level for them will facilitate fluent reading and build the strategies and confidence they need to tackle more difficult text.

Next, we have to help our students build strategies for self-monitoring and self-correction. By modeling, demonstration, and guided practice, we can show students how to ask questions, visualize and keep track of whether they understand as they read. We need to teach them to go back and reread if something doesn't make sense, or to read on to the end of the sentence or paragraph.

We also need to teach them to integrate a variety of word solving strategies. Phonics only tells us how to pronounce a word; context only provides meaning. Looking for meaningful "chunks" in words such as rimes and onsets, prefixes and suffixes, root words and derivatives aids pronunciation and comprehension.

And finally we have to train ourselves to "back off" and give our students the opportunity apply self-monitoring strategies, rather than training them to rely on us to let them know when they make a miscue. Conventional wisdom suggests that the average "wait time" for teachers is one to two seconds. If we can even hold on for three to five seconds, it will help our students to develop self-monitoring strategies.

Classroom Practices That Promote Fluency

There are many motivational classroom activities that build reading fluency. We have to start by returning oral reading to our classrooms. It is difficult to either assess or teach fluency during silent reading, but we know that fluent oral readers are also fluent silent

readers. There are many alternatives to the traditional "round robin reading" that not only build reading proficiency, but motivate students as well.

1. Teacher Read-alouds

Teacher read-alouds should be a model of fluency and expression for students. This is why it's important to preview a book before reading it to students, just to ensure that you are going to be able to read it smoothly without hesitations. It's also important to explicitly teach effective oral reading strategies – why certain words are emphasized, for example, or how to read in phrases.

Even when students are given a passage to read independently, it is useful for the teacher to read the first page aloud. This sets the tone of the reading and may even introduce some unfamiliar vocabulary.

2. Shared Reading

The shared book experience is characterized by the use of enlarged text which is visible to all the students. This text may take the form of a Big Book, experience chart or sentence strips in a pocket chart. Generally, the teacher reads the text first, modeling fluency and expression, and the students join in during subsequent readings.

This is also a good activity for weaning students from word-by-word reading. At the earliest levels, we teach students to track, or point to each word as they read them. This develops that important concept of word, and facilitates decoding. But once students have developed good decoding skills, we need to teach them to read in phrases, just as we speak. One way to do this is to smoothly track under lines of text rather than words, or to slide a ruler or bookmark under each line.

Unison or choral reading requires a group of readers to read together. This enables the teacher to guide the phrasing and expression of the readers. Echo reading employs imitation as students repeat each phrase after the teacher.

4. Explicit Teaching of Oral Reading Fluency

The shared reading experience is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate and explicitly teach a variety of reading strategies, including fluency. Ask the students what they heard in your oral reading. Talk about why this word or that was emphasized, or why a certain sentence or phrase may be read in a different tone or volume. Model different ways of reading the same chunk of text and invite students to discuss which example best *matched the author's intent*.

Teach students to "look for the signals". Punctuation marks, font changes, italics or bold face signal the reader to read this text in a certain way in order to get the author's

intended meaning. Placement of commas and other punctuation marks may affect the meaning of the text; for example, "Harry, the dog is coming after you!" has quite a different meaning than "Harry the dog is coming after you", particularly to Harry! Often we need to deliberately draw students' attention to signals such as capital letters, enlarged or bold print, questions or exclamation marks. You may want to create a class chart of different signals the students encounter.

Another strategy is to examine a page of text, and practice reading it together in different phrase groupings. Take, for example, the following line of text from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J.K. Rowling (Bloomsbury Publishing 1997, p. 7):

"They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense"

Reproduce this sentence on an overhead transparency, and, with the students, practice reading it with different phrase breaks. Have the students suggest places to break phrasing. You can have great fun with this! Talk with the students about which phrase groupings sound the best and which ones have the most logical meaning. Take time to note the purposes of punctuation in fluent reading. Also discuss the fact that not all phrases are the same length.

They were the/

last people you'd /

expect to be /

involved in anything/

strange or mysterious,/

because they just /

didn't hold with /

such nonsense"

OR...

"They were the last people you'd expect /

to be involved in anything strange or mysterious,/

because they just /

didn't hold with such nonsense".

4. Skim, Scan or Skip?

We read in different ways for different purposes. When we are looking for specific information, we *skim* the text searching for key words or phrases. When we want a general impression of what a chunk of text is about, we run our eyes over the text, or *scan* it. Sometimes we may even *skip* chunks of text if it does not suit our purposes.

Many students need to be explicitly taught to use different rates and styles of reading for different purposes. This means they need to prepare for reading by thinking about their purposes. Reading rates and styles will be different for reading dense informational texts than they will be for easy recreational reading.

Provide students with practice in the different kinds of reading. Talk about times they will scan a text for general impressions: looking at a book cover to see if they want to read the whole book, getting an overview of the news on the front page of the newspaper, finding the main idea of a passage or paragraph.

Skimming is a skill that requires plenty of practice. Ask the students to read a passage of text silently. (It's a good idea to start with short chunks of text, such as paragraphs, before moving to entire pages and chapters.) Then have them reread to find specific bits of information. Teach the students to find key words in the task and to run their eyes over the page quickly searching for those key words. For example, if the students are asked to find the sentence that describes what Templeton the Rat ate, they might skim for words such as *eat* or *food*.

This activity helps promote literal comprehension of text and informational retrieval. But understanding text often means using the information in the text to interpret and make inferences. Make sure to provide plenty of opportunities for your students to extend their thinking using information in the text. For example, you might ask them to tell whether they would choose the Paper Bag Princess or Prince Roland for a friend and give examples from the text to support their answer, or whether you thought *Hatchet's* Brian was a hero and give proof from the story.

Much of the reading process is implicit, in the head. When we explicitly teach these processes, we make them metacognitive.

5. Paired Reading

According to the report of The National Reading Panel (2000), Guided Repeated Oral Reading is the most effective procedure for developing reading fluency. Guided Repeated Oral Reading involves giving students an opportunity to read a passage aloud, receive feedback on their reading, then reread the passage again and again until they have reached a desired level of proficiency. This process of carefully designed feedback and guided practice is shown to have a significant impact on reading fluency. Many paired reading and performance reading strategies involve this process, as readers rehearse to provide increasingly fluent readings.

When one partner is a more capable reader than the other, such as in the case of a tutor, parent or even a more fluent peer, echo reading and unison reading may be used to build fluency. A more formalized paired reading structure requires the tutor to read a short passage aloud. Then the partners read the passage together in unison several times. When she feels ready, the other partner reads the passage aloud on her own. The tutor provides encouragement and modeling.

4. Performance Reading

Repeated reading for practice becomes more authentic when performance is the goal at hand. Readers Theatre is a simple, but excellent activity for promoting reading practice and performance. Readers Theatre requires participants to perform a script using only their voices. No props, costumes or gestures are required. The script is read, not memorized. Students must interpret and practice the text to perform it for an audience. Martinez, Roser and Strecker (1999) found that a ten week implementation of Readers Theatre resulted in a year's gain in reading speed for their students.

No poetry study would be complete without oral reading of poetry. When students have the opportunity to practice and perform a poetry reading, they are not only building reading fluency, they are also learning to appreciate the sounds of poetry.

An interesting activity is to assign a short poem to each group of four or five students. (Poems by Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky or Dennis Lee work well.) The students must work together to decide how to perform the poem: which lines each individual will read, which lines will be read by the group; which lines will be read loudly or softly or quickly or slowly. Performance tasks like these force students to really think about reading fluency.

Of course, it should always be remembered that fluency is a means toward increased reading proficiency, not an end in itself. The primary emphasis in reading instruction

should always be comprehension; however, when students can read with fluency, they will read more, read better and enjoy it more.

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