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Fluency for everyone: Incorporating fluency instruction in the classroom

Using and combining suggested principles may help teachers create fluency activities that meet their individual classroom needs.

Although there is no universal agreement about what constitutes reading fluency, most authorities would agree that it refers to the smooth and natural oral production of written text.

Harris and Hodges (1981), for example, define fluency as expressing oneself "smoothly, easily, and readily," having "freedom from word identification problems," and dealing with "words, and larger language units" with quickness (p. 120). Thus, at a minimum one might expect the fluent reader to read orally with accuracy, quickness, and expression.

Achieving fluency is recognized as an important aspect of proficient reading, but it remains a neglected goal of reading instruction (Allington, 1983). Most basal reading programs give little recognition to fluency as an important goal, and few reading textbooks for prospective teachers provide an indepth treatment of the topic.

Reading fluency often becomes a salient issue only when students demonstrate significant deficiencies. These students are often referred to corrective or remedial classes where they finally receive special instruction in the development of fluent reading.

How can classroom teachers teach fluency to their students? Several methods have been proven successful. These include repeated readings (Dowhower, 1987; Herman, 1985; Samuels, 1979), reading while listening or echo reading (Carbo, 1978; Chomsky, 1976; Gamby, 1983; Laffey and Kelly, 1981; Schneeberg, 1977; Van Der Leij, 1981), the neurological impress method (Heckelman, 1969), and reading in phrases (Allington, 1983; Amble and Kelly, 1970; Gregory, 1986).

One potential problem with these fluency training methods is that they were, in general, originally intended for use in corrective reading situations involving an instructor working with one, two, or a very small group of students. Despite many positive aspects of these methods, the focus of their application is overly narrow.

Teachers who wish to make fluency instruction an integral part of the regular reading curriculum may be at a loss in attempting to use corrective fluency methods in a way that is appropriate for the more normal reader.

Fortunately, the methods shown to be effective in helping less fluent readers suggest a set of principles that teachers may find helpful. In the remainder of this article those principles will be identified and discussed.

Proven methods

Repetition. Achieving fluency requires practice with one text until a criterion level is achieved.

Although the principle of repetition is often translated into repeated exposures to target words in isolation, research has shown that repetition is most effective when students meet the target words in a variety of texts or through repeated exposures to one text.

Although repetitions of texts may seem to be a dull activity, there are several ways to make it interesting and appealing. For example, young children love to hear their favorite stories read to them repeatedly (Beaver, 1982) and students enjoy working in pairs on repeated reading tasks (Koskinen and Blum, 1986).

Rasinski (1988) suggests several ways to use natural classroom events to encourage repeated readings. Activities such as putting on plays and having older students read short books to primary students require that students practice the text they will have to perform later on.

Model. Young students and other less fluent readers may not always know what fluent reading should be like. Poor readers, for example, are usually assigned to reading groups in which the predominant model of reading is other disfluent readers. It seems clear that students need frequent opportunities to see and hear fluent reading.

Since the most fluent reader in the classroom is the teacher, the teacher should be the primary model. The easiest and most stimulating way to do this is to read good children's literature to the class. Daily periods should be set aside for teachers (and other fluent readers) to read aloud.

Direct instruction and feedback. Research into metacognition in reading is demonstrating that it may be important for readers to be aware of what happens when they read and why they have reading problems. This awareness may be particularly helpful in the development of fluency.

Prior to reading aloud, the teacher could

remind the class to listen to the expression in his/her voice during the reading, the speed at which the text is read, or when stops or pauses occur. A short discussion of these factors after the reading or before students' own oral reading could heighten students' sensitivity to their own reading.

Similarly, providing feedback to students after they read orally can facilitate growth in fluent reading. Koskinen and Blum (1986), for example, propose a model of instruction in which students are trained to provide feedback to each other. The reader benefits from a formative critique of his or her reading and the student critic benefits from a heightened metacognitive sense of what it means to be a fluent reader.

Support during reading. The notion of scaffolding or support while performing is critical to the development of fluency, especially in the beginning stages or with students having difficulty. Support is achieved through the student hearing a fluent rendition of a passage while simultaneously reading the same. Several types of support are available.

Choral reading is perhaps the most common form of support reading and is highly appropriate for the regular classroom. Here students read a selected passage in unison. The teacher needs to ensure that several fluent readers are part of the group or that his/her own voice leads the way in the choral reading.

The neurological impress method (Heckelman, 1969) was designed as a remedial technique for use one to one. The teacher begins by reading slightly ahead of and louder than the student, and later, as the student gains in fluency, softly shadows the student's reading of the passage. Although labor intensive, the technique can be adapted for regular classroom use with aides, volunteers, or fluent classmates.

The use of tape recorded passages is another way to provide support during reading. Carbo (1978) reported students making good progress in reading while simultaneously listening to passages on tape. This format is especially appealing as it allows students to work on their fluency independently. They may need to be reminded to concentrate on reading the passage, not simply listen passively to it.

Text unit. Fluency involves reading texts in multiword chunks or phrases. Word by

word reading, even if it is accurate and fast, is not fluent reading. Timely reminders should help drive the point home.

Research has shown (e.g., Weiss, 1983) that marking phrase boundaries in student texts with a penciled slash or vertical line may aid fluency. Occasionally reading short texts such as poems, famous speeches, or popular songs marked in this way may help students develop and maintain a mature sense of phrasing.

Easy materials. Fluency is best promoted when students are provided with materials that they find relatively easy in terms of word recognition, so that they can move beyond decoding to issues of phrasing, expression, and comprehensibility of production. These materials help students develop a sense of power and confidence.

Teachers, then, need to stock their classroom libraries with books that represent a variety of difficulty levels and interests. For their independent reading, students can be directed to those materials that they will not find frustrating.

Combining principles

These principles offer some building blocks and guidelines for developing reading instruction and activities that promote the development of fluency. Rather than think of them in isolation, teachers can design lessons and activities that combine two or more of these principles.

In her study of disfluent 3rd graders, Carol Chomsky (1976) combined the principles of repetition and support. She had students listen to and read a tape recorded text until they could read it with fluency. Then they received instruction in various components of the text.

In a similar vein Koskinen and Blum's (1986) instructional model for fluency combines repetition and direct instruction. Students read a text three times and receive formative feedback (direct instruction in fluency) from their peers. In both the Chomsky and Koskinen and Blum models, students made substantial improvements in fluency.

Hoffman (1987) and Aulls (1982) offer even more complex models of fluency instruction which combine elements of modeling, repetition, support, and direct instruction.

Teachers empowered

The point is not that teachers should blindly endorse any of the models identified and described here. Rather, relying upon the principles of fluency instruction, informed and creative teachers can design instructional activities that meet the unique needs of their classrooms. They can incorporate one or more principles into the stories that students encounter in their daily lessons or pleasure reading, and depending upon students' progress can employ principles more or less strenuously.

Fluency is an issue that needs to be taken seriously in the reading classroom. The principles outlined here, while neither prescription nor panacea, offer teachers several tools for making their reading instruction reflect their own professional judgment.

Through the use of principles such as these, prepackaged and "teacher proof" reading programs that foster deskilling and promote a perception of teachers as incompetent can be turned back in favor of alternative and effective teacher designed instruction.

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The guest editor of the issue, Connie Bridge, notes, "Children acquire oral language easily and naturally within meaningful, contextualized situations in which they need to use language to accomplish personal and social purposes. Advocates of a whole literacy approach contend that children will learn to read and write in the same way they learn to speak if they are immersed in literate environments in which they need to read and write authentic texts to accomplish genuine purposes.

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