



The Role of the Teacher in Effective Fluency Instruction

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The past decade has seen reading fluency come to the forefront of reading instruction in the United States. Several significant reviews of the research and professional literature on fluency (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000; Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003) have come to the same conclusion: Reading fluency is a key component of effective literacy instruction at least through the elementary grades and students should receive regular instruction in reading fluency during these years. These reports and others (e.g., Rasinski & Zutell, 1996) also suggest that fluency instruction has not been an integral part of most reading curricula through the 1990s.

Most professional articles on teaching reading fluency have focused on the methods and procedures for teaching reading fluency. They have most often focused on repeated readings, assisted readings, and phrased reading as effective ways to provide fluency instruction that will make a difference in students' overall reading achievement. The research and theory to support these activities is strong and I, for one, insist that students in my reading clinic receive regular instruction using these methods.

Less apparent in this discussion of reading fluency instruction is the role of the teacher. Just what should the teacher be doing while students are practicing their reading, reading with a partner, or working on reading with good phrasing and expression? Few if any articles have dealt with this important issue. In fact, I have seen some classrooms in which students engage in fluency work on their own, with little input by the teacher.

In my work with students, those who have made the greatest gains in fluency have been those students who were lucky enough to have teachers directly involved in their fluency instruction. I have come to believe that, as in all types of educational endeavors, the teacher makes all the difference. This is certainly true for fluency instruction. In this article I attempt to outline what I think are some of

the critical roles that the teacher can and should take on in making reading fluency work for her students.

Modeling Fluent Reading—Fluency Awareness

A person learns best when they are aware of what it is they are supposed to learn. For many students, fluency is a nebulous concept. Just what does it mean to be fluent? For some students fluency may mean reading without error, for others it may mean reading as fast as they can. These are understandings that may be developed from the ways teachers assess students.

To my mind, fluency can best be described as reading

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orally in such a way that the reader is able to convey and construct meaning with his or her voice. By embedding appropriate expression, by reading with appropriate phrasing, by reading quickly at some spots and more slowly at other, or by adding a dramatic pause readers make meaning that transcends the words in the text. This is fluent reading.

One of the teacher's main roles in fluency instruction comes from making students aware of this sense of fluency. This is done primarily through reading orally to students – and then chatting with students about how they gave added meaning to the text through their voice. They may

also use such opportunities to discuss what they had to do in order to bring their reading to this level of fluency – practice.

Most elementary teachers read to their students regularly. However, some do not read with the rich expressive fluency that would make the reading even more satisfying for students. Moreover, very few teachers spend time talking with students about their fluent oral reading. Once students develop this awareness of fluency, they have in mind what it is they are aiming for in their own fluency work.

Fluency Coach

Repeated readings (reading texts several times until a level of fluency is achieved) and assisted reading (reading orally with a more fluent partner) are among the mainstays of fluency instruction (Rasinski, 1989, 2003). Although neither of these necessarily activities require the direct intervention of teachers, I feel that teachers can play an essential role here.

Practice without feedback may result in students practicing their errors or practicing to achieve the wrong goal (e.g., increase reading speed without regard to expression). Teachers need to take on a 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.

An athletic coach motivates, explains, gives feedback, gives praise, and admonishes when necessary. These same coaching tasks, and more, can be employed by the teacher in helping move students toward higher and more sophisticated levels of reading fluency.

Paired Reader

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 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, I think it is also important for the teacher to take on the role of fluent reading partner for

her students from time to time. 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 individual or pairs of students and read orally with the students as they read on their own. Every day the teacher can choose another student or pair with whom to work. 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 each student at least once a month. 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.

Teachers can also do this same sort of assisted reading with groups of students — from a small reading group to the entire classroom. Here is how this might work. To begin, every student needs a copy of the text to be read – it could be a book that all the children have, a poem or song lyric that is printed and copied on individual sheets of paper, or a short text written on chart paper. The teacher then reads this passage orally to students and requires the students to follow along silently using their own copies of the passage to be read. She may require students to use their pointer fingers to demonstrate to her that they are indeed following along so that as their eyes see the individual words in the passage their ears simultaneously hear the words read fluently by the teacher. The passage may be read several more times with the teacher gradually giving more responsibility to students for the reading with each successive reading. This makes for powerful fluency instruction as it integrates repeated readings into the assisted reading lesson.

Resource Collector

Fluency instruction normally involves assisted, repeated (practice or rehearsal) and oral reading. (I should 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 resource provider 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 (tape recorders, CD players, I-Pods, etc.) 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 are 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) are among the texts that I find lend themselves most fittingly to fluency instruction. Not only are these texts meant to 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.

If such texts are not easily found in the school books that students are normally exposed to, it is up to the teacher to become a collector of such material. This may mean scouring the school and community library, searching the internet, and working with colleagues to develop a collection of material that is not only appropriate for fluency instruction, but also integrates well into other areas of the curriculum. For example, historical speeches and songs can easily be integrated into a social studies curriculum; poetry can be found to tie into stories and themes under study and even into science, social studies, art, and other curricular areas.

Some teachers I know have used their own creative instincts to develop their own fluency materials that meld into their curriculum. For example, some teachers now write their own poetry which they perform and have students practice and perform. Primary grade teachers write poems that highlight word rimes (word families) that are essential to students' word decoding (phonics development). Beyond the primary grades, teachers write poems that reflect themes from literature and content from science and social studies. Here's an example of one written by a teacher for her science curriculum.

Are you Karyotic?

A wise man once told me
There are two kinds of cells.
How do you know them?
Well, the nucleus tells.
If the nucleus is bound
Then the cell is eukaryotic.
If the nucleus is unbound
Then he's prokaryotic.

Teachers I know have also begun to write readers theater scripts that fit into their curriculum. For example, the story or a segment of a story from a basal reader or trade book can easily be converted into a script to be practiced and performed by students. Stories from history, as well as famous speeches, and even documents have been transformed into scripts for students. Fourth grade teacher Lorraine Griffith from Buncombe County, North Carolina

has done a marvelous job of transforming the Preamble to the Constitution into a powerful script for her students (see Rasinski & Griffith, 2005a, b, & c for this and other examples of texts, songs, and scripts developed by Lorraine and Tim for classroom use).

If teachers can write poetry, scripts, and songs, so can students. Teachers can use their own writing experiences as springboards for students to try their own hand at writing these performance texts that represent different genre. Creative teachers can inspire reading fluency instruction to become an opportunity for authentic writing experiences as well.

Provide for Performance

At its heart, fluency 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 from a reader or exercise book.

Informed teachers, however, see practice as essential, but attempt to find material that is meant to be performed. If the passage, whether a song, script, speech, or poem is meant to be performed, it has to be practiced. 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 an audience to perform for.

In a similar way, teachers can set up daily or weekly opportunities for students to perform their songs, scripts, or other texts that are to be performed. 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.

Progress Monitor

More and more the need for documenting students' progress in reading has become a mandate for all schools. This requires periodic assessment of students. The problem with such assessments is that they often are time consuming and they are not sensitive enough to detect small gains in students' reading. Measuring reading fluency, however,

provides a teacher with a way to monitor students' progress in a way that is both quick and that detects small changes in student performance. Moreover, since fluency has been shown to correlate well with other more general measures of student progress in reading, such assessments can be used as proxies for measurements of students' overall progress in reading (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Rasinski, 2004).

Based on the groundbreaking work of Deno and his colleagues (1985; Deno, Mirkin, & Chiang, 1982; Marston, 1989) on Curriculum-Based Measurement in reading (also known as Oral Reading Fluency assessment), my colleague Nancy Padak and myself (Rasinski & Padak, 2005a, 2005b) developed a quick assessment of students' word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension. Essentially, students read a grade level passage orally for one minute while the teacher marks any word recognition errors. This is followed by a brief retelling of the passage that the teacher rates. From this brief reading and retelling the teacher is able to determine levels of word recognition accuracy, fluency (words read correctly per minute), and comprehension. Thus, in about three minutes a teacher can get a fairly robust assessment of a student that is sensitive to change over short periods of time and that is a good measure of students' overall progress in reading. The brevity of the assessment allows teachers to assess her students three or four times a year, thus giving her the data needed to demonstrate growth for each and every student in her classroom.

I think it is essential for teachers to document progress in this manner. If this is not done, how can teachers be assured that their students are making good and appropriate progress? How will they be able to identify those students who may need additional support or referral for more detailed assessments? Teachers need to take on the role of monitor of students' progress in reading. Fortunately, tools now exist and are being developed that allow teachers to do just that.

CONCLUSION

Over twenty years ago, Dick Allington (1983) alerted us to the notion that reading fluency is an important component in the reading curriculum and that it was not currently being aggressively taught in our classrooms. Since then we have made great strides in our understanding of reading fluency and in methods for teaching reading fluency. What we have not explored as thoroughly has been the role of the teacher in fluency instruction.

I am certain that there are other roles teachers can and must take on to make reading fluency work in their classrooms. Nevertheless, I hope this paper allows us to begin to think about, explore more deeply, and discuss with one another the critical and essential roles of the teacher in exemplary fluency instruction. Methods of instruction are no doubt important. However, unless they are implemented by knowledgeable, caring, and enthusiastic teachers methods are little more than empty vessels.

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