

Fluency: An Ingredient for Successful Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

Research has shown that fluency is an important component in reading comprehension and should not be overlooked. Theorist's ideas and suggestions for fluency were discussed and implemented, so teachers or other educators could understand how to use them with students to improve reading comprehension. The author shared research-based strategies that will support students in their quest for becoming fluent, proficient readers. Many simple technology resources and ideas are imparted to enhance fluency development. Assessments used for the components of fluency were discussed in detail and the rationale for their use.

Fluency: An Ingredient for Successful Reading Comprehension

Introduction

Reading fluency is a very important factor in the process of becoming a proficient reader. According to research, the majority of readers assessed as having reading difficulties lack one or more components of fluency (Wolfe, Miller, & Donnelly, 2000). The National Reading Panel (NRP) lists fluency as one of the major components of a successful reading program. What is fluency? Merriam-Webster dictionary defines fluency as “the ability to do something in a way that seems very easy.” The National Reading Panel (2000) describes fluency as reading words easily with speed, accuracy, expression, and understanding. Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, and Meisinger (2010) compiled four definitions of fluency and refined its definition to allow for fluency to include a combination of accuracy, automaticity, and oral reading prosody which when combined, allows the reader to construct meaning. Fluency is demonstrated in oral reading through ease of word recognition, appropriate pacing, phrasing, and intonation. Fluency has many definitions, but one thing is certain, it is needed for success.

Importance Fluency

Research has shown that fluency is an important component for a successful reading program. Just as each ingredient in a recipe is important to the success of a dish, so is each component of a reading program. If the chef leaves out a major ingredient, then the recipe will fail. The National Reading Panel has deemed fluency as one of the five major components necessary for a successful reading program, so leaving out one of the major components would cause it to fail, just like the recipe.

Fluency is one of the keys or ingredients to reading comprehension, which is the basis of all learning, no matter the content. Students who are fluent can concentrate on comprehending the text, and not decoding it. When students do not read fluently, they risk their ability to understand what they read, and thus, are just word callers. As readers progress through school, the amount of reading that is needed gets larger, so non-fluent readers will have trouble meeting the demands. Another problem for non-fluent readers, is that they become embarrassed and read less, causing them further comprehension problems (Allington, 2013). They actually need more repeated reading, practice, and a fluent reader to model the process, to become fluent. The teacher or model can use appropriate phrasing and expression as they read aloud to students. There are many other strategies that can assist in fluency development.

Strategies

Research-based strategies for fluency development are imperative, if success is the goal. There are many strategies (Figure 1) available that can be used to teach fluency, but using simple, effective strategies is the correct approach. Fluency is best taught by modeling, practice, and repeated readings of on-level text (Vacca, Vacca, Gove, Burkey, Lenhart, and McKeon, 2010). Many researchers agree, that some of the ways to accomplish fluency are reading aloud, paired reading, reader's theater, echo, and choral reading. The automaticity theory provides a perspective to interpret the relationships between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension (Ching, Hui, Lee Lay, 2014). It says that a fluent reader has mastered the skill of decoding words and are able to comprehend text without having to think about the phonemes of every single word. Reading accuracy is a key component of the automaticity theory. When a reader is able to decode the words with little cognitive effort, comprehension is easier to attain.

Reading aloud to students allows the teacher to model accuracy, automaticity and prosody, as well as an opportunity to think aloud to aid in comprehension. There are numerous books that can be used to model fluent reading. Some books have natural phrasing, as do poems. Figure 2 provides a few possible suggestions of books and poems that can be used with fluency instruction and practice. There are online ebooks and audiobooks available for purchase or free and websites like, www.storyplace.org and www.storyline.com that can be used to aid with fluency (Figure 3). Some of the ebooks can be projected onto interactive whiteboards and phrases tracked with the pen. Too, the teacher can use a presentation tool like, PowerPoint, to create a projection of free ebooks that can be found online. Once the book is put into a presentation, slash marks can be added between phrases, modeled, and practiced with the students. These book projections allow for many other practice possibilities. Books on tape and ipods can be used with headphones for listening to a fluent reader model prosody. Technology offers many ways to aid and support fluency especially through reading aloud, but they can also be used with other fluency strategies mentioned above, like choral reading.

Choral reading is an effective strategy that can be used to improve fluency. The definition of choral reading is reading together as a group or in unison. The majority of people today have been a participant in choral reading in some way. It could have been utilized in boy or girl scouts, a pledge, church, vows, and many other ways. This strategy provides a risk free environment for students to practice fluency, and builds reader self-confidence. The readers will be supported and guided by the teacher or leader. This can be practiced as many times as needed. Choral reading can be used with any genre or in any content area, as long as the readers have a copy or see a projection of what is being read. Paragraphs, poems, and stories can be written on chalkboards and white boards or on chart paper with slash marks between phrases for practice, too. The presentation technology tools are effective for this strategy, and so are other technology devices, such as an ipad or tablet. Students can be paired together to use these devices.

Paired or partner reading is another fluency strategy that helps students. This strategy has students in pairs or partnered with another student or adult to take turns reading and practicing fluency. The other partner, who is not reading is listening and following the text. The pair can choose to swap turns reading aloud or listening and following by page or paragraph. Multiple readings of texts are required to establish fluency, so this can be done over and over. Other technology devices that will aid with fluency instruction are ipads, tablets, and other ereaders. These devices will permit individual or paired use by students for fluency practice as they build confidence with their skills. Tools with audio and video capabilities can be used to record students as they read. One excellent website that students enjoy using is www.voki.com. This website allows students to create an avatar that they can choose how it looks and sounds. After creating the avatar, the students record themselves reading a passage, then listen and see how they sound. The avatar moves and looks like a person or creature, if that is what they choose. It is very revealing to the student to hear themselves read. This allows the student to self-evaluate and hear what they need to work on. The teachers input will make it stronger. Partner or paired reading strategy works well with the technology devices, but can also be used with hard copies of books, poems, or paper copies. The pair can even use the chart paper version for practice. All these traditional and technology delivery systems support fluency development. The diversity of ways to implement the strategies are good, but it is imperative that the students remain motivated to improve their fluency skills. Making fluency instruction fun for the students will keep them engaged.

Echo reading is when the teacher reads a line or short segment of text, and the students repeat it with exactly the same rate, phrasing, and expression. This can be fun for students because the teacher or leader can use interesting voice tones, dialect, and inflection to model the phrases and they repeat exactly the same way. This is a good strategy for fluency instruction, because the teacher or the person leading is modeling fluent reading (Gunning, 2012). It also helps with word learning, by having students see the word in print as the teacher or leader says it, according to Jennings, Caldwell, and Lerner (2014). Technology devices like ipads, tablets, ereaders, and others can be used by the students to follow and see the print as the teacher reads, then they echo with the same expression. The teacher can point to the words as he/she reads. Just as diverse technology devices can be used with fluency, so can different types of texts. For example, poems or other content area text may be used. Also, there are CDs available online that have fun themes for the students to listen and repeat the lines of text. These CDs and other technology are successful in enhancing fluency strategies and making learning fun.

Readers' theater is a fun way to foster fluency, that both students and teachers enjoy. It is a dramatic presentation of a story by the students, using a script that they read. The students are assigned or choose parts that they read as the story progresses. Readers' theater improves fluency, by having students practice with repeated reading, and use expression, intonation, and inflection. The students, also, learn to work in cooperative groups and use their listening and speaking skills. Costumes, props, or puppets may be used, as well. Some children's book authors, like Jan Brett, www.janbrett.com, have characters for their books that can be downloaded and turned into puppets to use for the dramatic presentation. A stage could be constructed with just a sheet over a table. This dramatic presentation could be as elaborate as time allows. It can also be used with many age groups (DeVries, 2015). All of this is motivating for the students and keeps them engaged. It is important to give the students time to practice their parts, rehearse together, and get feedback from the teacher. Encourage students to use expression and volume with their voices and share other suggestions to improve fluency. There are many readers' theater scripts websites online, like www.timelessteacherstuff.com and www.busyteacherscafe.com that provide excellent scripts that will keep the students stimulated to practice. See figure 4 for some website suggestions for readers' theater scripts. All of these strategies and techniques are effective in fluency development, but it is essential that the teacher assess all parts of fluency to make sure there is growth.

Assessment

Another major part of fluency development is assessment. Assessment is important in guiding instruction, and finding out what students know and need to work on. Assessing fluency can be informal or formal. It can be as simple as a teacher observing students read, to a more complex, formal test like, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). There are many assessments available, but finding the right assessments to use for the multiple parts or subskills of fluency are essential. Rasinski (2004) believes that assessments for fluency should be simple or easy to use, quick, and cover all parts of fluency. He says that students can do well with accuracy and automaticity, but still not understand what they read. When speaking of assessing fluency, Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, and Meisinger (2010), too, say that the emphasis should be on reading fluently and not just words per minute or speed. There is more than just finding out the words correct per minute (WCPM) weekly and comparing the scores. This assessment is for the rate, accuracy, and automaticity of fluency. To improve this area, using running records and a miscue analysis would give more detailed information. For example, the results would tell what type of errors or miscues the student made, like was it a graphophonic, semantic, or syntactic mistakes (DeVries, 2015). This information is more diagnostic and gives the teacher a guide of what to work on with the student. There is another part to fluency that needs to be addressed, and that is prosody. Prosody emphasizes expression and phrasing, and according to Rasinski (2004), it is the main fluency component that leads to reading comprehension. He suggests using multidimensional rubrics that specifically look at expression and phrasing. Zutell and Rasinski (1991) developed a rubric that looks at expression, phrasing, smoothness, and pace. Rubrics are effective and can be adjusted to emphasize the subskills needed to assess fluency.

Conclusion

Reading is a vital part of life, and fluency is an important component of the process. Fluency is necessary for reading comprehension and must be taught, practiced, and assessed. When students are not able to read fluently, they struggle to comprehend and make meaning of the text. Instruction for fluency cannot be overlooked or left out. The components of fluency include reading accuracy, automaticity and prosody. Teachers must plan thorough, engaging lessons with effective strategies, so students can improve fluency in order to establish comprehension. Just because someone can read the words on a page does not mean they comprehend it.

Students need opportunities to read and reread texts and to hear fluent readers to establish fluency and build confidence in their ability. Technology extends strategies and resources for fluency practice and promotes engagement by the students. Assessments are needed to guide the teacher's fluency instruction to know what strategies to use to improve their skills.

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Figure 1: Website Suggestions for Fluency Strategies

<http://www.fcrr.org>

<http://www.readingresouce.net>

<http://www.readingrockets.org>

<http://www.scholastic.com>

<http://www.interventioncentral.org>

<http://www.powerupwhatworks.org>

<http://www.enchantedlearning.com>

<http://www.readwritethink.org>

<http://www.busyteacherscafe.com>

<http://www.maketaketeach.com>

<http://www.readingpartners.org>

Figure 2: Book and Poem Suggestions for Building Fluency**Books:***Eats, Shoots & Leaves: Why, Commas Really Do Matter* by Lynne Truss*Where is the**Green Sheep* by Mem Fox*Skin Like Milk, Hair of Silk: What Are Similes and Metaphors?* By Brian P. Cleary*Llama Llama Red Pajama* by Anna Dewdney*How to Make a Friend* by Rozanne Williams*The Napping House* by Audrey Wood*Brown Bear, Brown Bear What do you See?* by Bill Martin, Jr.*The Pout-Pout Fish* by Deborah Diesen**Poems:***A Light in the Attic* by Shel Silverstein*Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein*Something Big Has Been Here* by Jack Prelutsky*The Armpit of Doom: Funny Poems for Kids* by Kenn Nesbitt*The Biggest Burp Ever: Funny Poems for Kids* by Kenn Nesbitt**Figure 3: Free Online ebook Website Suggestions**<http://www.storylineonline.net><http://www.robertmunsch.com><http://www.oxfordowl.co.uk><http://www.indypl.org><http://www.publicbookshelf.com>**Figure 4: Website Suggestions for Reader's Theater Scripts**<http://www.timelessteacherstuff.com><http://www.busyteacherscafe.com><http://pbskids.org/zoom/activities/playhouse><http://myteacherpages.com/webpages/JGriffin/readers.cfm><http://www.thebestclass.org><http://www.teachingheart.net>