

Supportive Fluency Instruction:
The Key to Reading Success
(Especially for Students who Struggle)

Timothy Rasinski, Ph.D.
Reading and Writing Center, Kent State University

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The unfortunate truth is that too many students in the United States struggle in learning to read. According to the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013) a third of all fourth grade students in the United States read at a level that is considered “below basic;” only 8% read at a level that is considered “advanced.” Among eighth-graders 24% are “below basic” and only 3% “advanced.” Moreover, despite enormous efforts to raise achievement in reading in the U.S., these levels of reading achievement have been relatively consistent for the past twenty years. Not only do many of our students struggle in reading, many students do not find reading enjoyable or worthwhile. In a report published in *Reading Today* (2010) only half of students, ages 9 to 17, indicate that reading for fun is important.

Clearly, work still needs to be done to raise reading achievement (and motivation) in the United States. Just what is the source of concern for students who struggle in reading? Although there are a number of areas that appear to be sources of reading difficulty, Valencia and Buly (2004) found that a substantial number of fifth grade students who scored below the proficient standard on a fourth grade state reading test exhibited difficulties in what the Common Core State Standards have identified as a foundational reading skill -- reading fluency. In another study of students referred for reading intervention Rasinski and Padak (1999) found that reading fluency was the most prevalent source of difficulty. Lack of proficiency in this foundational aspect of reading prevents readers from fully comprehending the texts that they read. If fluency problems are not addressed in the elementary grades it is likely that students with these problems will continue to hinder students' reading progress in subsequent years. Research has found that difficulties in reading fluency persist through the middle and secondary grade levels (Rasinski, et al, 2005; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). In this paper I explore ways that teachers can help students overcome difficulties in this critical area of reading development.

What is the best way to develop proficiency in fluency? One answer is simply practice in reading. The more reading students do, the better readers they become, especially in the foundational reading skills. However, rather than simple independent reading, it appears that supportive (scaffolded) reading provide struggling readers with the supports that allow them to be successful in the reading experience. In their recent review of research on reading fluency instruction, Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, and Linan-Thompson (2011) found that opportunities for supportive reading resulted in significant and substantial gains in the foundational reading skills and overall reading achievement. Yet, despite its recognized importance, fluency instruction is often severely limited in primary grade classrooms (Gamse, et al., 2008) and is not viewed as an important instructional issue by many reading experts (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2012).

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How to Provide Reading Support to Develop Fluency in Reading

There are several ways for students to be supported in their reading fluency development (Rasinski, 2010; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). A good starting place for fluency instruction is to show students examples of fluent reading so that they can develop in their own mind's eye an authentic sense of fluency. Because of the emphasis that has been placed on fast reading as an expression of reading fluency, many students think that the way to become a fluent reader is to read faster, without regard for meaning (Rasinski, 2012). By providing students with a model of fluent, expressive reading teachers can demonstrate to students what fluent reading sounds like and how it can improve comprehension. Teachers can model fluent reading for students by reading to their students. Teachers can also model fluency by providing other examples of fluent reading, either from other readers or recordings of other fluent readers.

A second supportive approach to developing reading fluency is through assisted reading (Rasinski, 2012). Assisted reading involves a developing reader reading a text while simultaneously listening to a fluent oral reading of the same text. The developing reader attempts to make his or her reading match the reading he or she is listening to. At the same time, the fluent reading of the text provides a direct support for the student who may otherwise struggle with the passage.

A very common form of assisted reading that is done in many classrooms is choral reading. When students read as a group, those students who are not yet fluent are supported by their classmates and teacher who reads with them (Paige, 2011). Assisted reading can also take the form of reading with one other reader, a reader who is more fluent than the student (Topping, 1987; 1989). Even captioned television can provide opportunities for students to engage in assisted reading – readers read the text displayed on a television screen while simultaneously (or near simultaneously) hearing an oral version of the text (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011).

Technology offers some of the most interesting and versatile possibilities for providing students with assisted reading experiences. When students read a text while simultaneously listening to a pre-recorded version of the same text they are, in effect, engaging in assisted reading. Studies on assisted reading using recorded readings have shown great promise for improving reading fluency and overall reading proficiency (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). While early versions of recorded readings involved audio tape recordings matched to a book or other written text, more recent iterations of technology assisted readings involve using computer technology to integrate both the visual and audio presentation of texts.

Fluency in any endeavor requires practice, and developing fluency in reading is no exception. The most common form of practice in reading is what has been termed wide reading. In wide reading the goal is for students to maximize their exposure to new texts. Students read a text once and, after opportunities to discuss and explore the meaning and/or structure of the text, they move onto a new text. Clearly, this form of reading practice is important and dominates

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most reading instruction programs and has been shown to improve reading fluency and comprehension (Kuhn, et al., 2006). One obvious prerequisite for students to engage in wide reading is that they need to read real texts for real purposes. Students are more likely to engage in reading when the texts they are asked to read are authentic and satisfying. In many current instructional reading programs texts are chosen less because of their potential for engaging readers and more for their level of difficulty, genre, and informational content.

For students who may not achieve fluency on a text with one reading a second form of practice may be required, a form of practice that by its very nature offers support to developing readers. This form of practice is called repeated or deep reading with feedback. In repeated reading, students are asked to read a text several time until they achieve at least a minimal level of fluency in their reading. As students read a text more than once, their previous reading of the text provides a support that allows their new reading to be more fluent and meaningful. A substantial body of research beginning with Samuels’ (1979) classic study of repeated reading has demonstrated the power of repeated reading, especially for struggling readers (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011).

Modeling fluent reading, assisted reading, wide reading, and deep (repeated) reading are the building blocks to fluency. Individually these instructional elements have the potential to improve reading. When combined in an integrated manner into a program that combines these elements the potential impact on fluency and overall reading proficiency is even greater. A synergistic effect is created in which the effect of the combined instructional approach is greater than the sum of the individual elements themselves. In their review of integrated reading fluency instruction, Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson (2011) found that such approaches consistently resulted in reading improvements in word identification, reading fluency, and reading comprehension.

So Where Are We With Fluency?

Let’s summarize what we have covered. We know that we have a substantial number of students in the United States (and across the world) who struggle in learning to read. Research over the past four decades has indicated that reading fluency is a major concern for many students who struggle in reading. A substantial amount of students with poor comprehension can be attributed to difficulties in reading fluency. Moreover, fluency is a concern that goes well beyond the elementary grades. Methods of instruction have been identified to improve students reading fluency and overall reading proficiency.

Yet, despite the evidence that supports the importance of fluency in reading and methods of instruction for developing fluency, fluency continues to be a missing goal (Allington, 1983) in many classrooms and instructional programs. Indeed, recent surveys of experts in reading indicate that reading fluency is a “not hot” topic for reading instruction and that it should not be considered “hot” (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2012). What is needed are approaches to fluency instruction that are integrate proven methods of fluency instruction with authentic literature that children and adolescents find engaging and satisfying.

“The approaches to fluency instruction that are embedded in [myON reader] offers teachers the opportunity to design effective fluency instruction using real literature that will definitely lead to improved levels of fluency.”

myON® reader

myON reader is an approach to reading fluency instruction that incorporates the elements of effective fluency instruction with a wide body and diverse body of authentic literature using some of the latest advances in educational technology. myON reader provides students with one of the largest online collections of authentic reading material for children and adolescents. With myON reader students select real books that match to their interests and reading. The multi-media platform on which the books are presented provides students with a very supportive environment for successful reading. They are able to listen to the text prior to their own reading (modeled reading), they can read the text while listening to a fluent recorded rendering of the text (assisted reading), and they can read the text on their own one or more times without the support of the recorded text (repeated reading). Moreover, support is also offered at the word level. If students encounter an unfamiliar word, they have the ability to instantly obtain a definition for the targeted word. And following one successful reading experience, students move on to another book that matches or extends their interest and stretches them into progressively more challenging and complex texts.

Although there are many other instructional and assessment features to myON reader the approaches to fluency instruction that are embedded in the program offers teachers the opportunity to design effective fluency instruction using real literature that will definitely lead to improved levels of fluency, overall more proficient readers, and students who see reading as an enjoyable and authentic task.



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