It's Not Just About Speed: The Role of Prosody in Reading Fluency Instruction

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With direct instruction in elements of prosody, teachers can see improvements in assessment scores, as well as hearing better readers who understand that reading isn’t just about reading fast.

The National Reading Panel has made every teacher much more aware of the need for fluency instruction in the classroom. Unfortunately, at some schools assessing fluency has become important, but teaching children to read fluently has not. Few classroom teachers were trained to teach children to read fluently, nor were they made aware of why it is so important to teach them to do so. This article discusses my attempts as a reading specialist to make direct instruction in fluency a part of a comprehensive school reading program.

I had just visited a second grade classroom to complete the oral reading assessments required by my school. I was dissatisfied with the way these had turned out in the past. They were once known as the “Minute Reads,” and the students read as many words as they could in one minute. For some, this meant spitting out as many words as their mouths could manage as quickly as they could. When I gave the comprehension check that followed the timed reading, I observed that children whom I knew to be good readers often had low comprehension scores. They also had very high reading rates. What message were we giving the children about reading?

Resolving that this year would be different, I discussed the task with the class before they did the reading. I asked them what they thought fluency was. It was not surprising to hear that many thought it meant reading fast. Others thought it meant reading loudly enough for others to hear them. We briefly discussed expression and phrasing. Next we talked about how a reader’s goal should always be comprehension, or understanding what he reads. I read a paragraph at breakneck speed and asked the students if they understood what it was about; we then discussed appropriate pacing. The whole discussion took five minutes, yet I saw that some of the children attempted to use more expression as they read. More importantly, I had fewer “racers,” those who seemed to try to set a record for how fast they could read. When I left the classroom, the teacher said to me, “You know, I don’t think anyone has ever talked with them about reading like that.” I decided that it was time someone did.
Meyer and Felton (1999) define fluency as "the ability to read connected text rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly, and automatically, with little conscious attention to the mechanics of reading, such as decoding" (p. 284). When I was completing my graduate program as a reading specialist in the early 1990s, no one ever talked about fluency. It was sort of the "icing on the cake." If children read fluently, that was nice; but if they didn’t, they probably had other issues that were more important.

The report of the National Reading Panel (2002) tells us otherwise. Studies examined by the Panel found a connection between fluency and comprehension. When conducting the Integrated Reading Performance Record for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1999), Pinnell and others found a close relationship between reading fluency and overall reading proficiency.

When children read fluently, they are able to make meaning from the text, rather than focusing on mechanics such as decoding words (Meyer & Felton, 1999). Observing first graders learning to read, Clay (1993) found, “When the reading is phrased like spoken language and the responding is fluent (and some people say fast), then there is a fair chance that the reader can read for meaning and check what he reads against his language knowledge” (p. 51).

Children who read without fluency often choose not to read (Meyer & Felton, 1999). Assuming that they are not fully comprehending the material, why would they choose to read it? Expending mental energy to slog through a story in a word by word manner offers little payoff in terms of enjoyment. We have long known that children who read more are better readers, while those who read less continue to lag behind (Rasinski, 2000; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). These children often have difficulty keeping up with their schoolwork and develop negative attitudes toward school (Worthy & Broaddus).

Lack of fluency can occur for several reasons, including slow word recognition, lack of awareness of syntactic structure, and failure to make higher order connections between words and meanings (Meyer & Felton, 1999). Based on their accuracy scores on the oral reading assessments, I knew my students’ word recognition skills were not contributing to their poor fluency. However, I observed that many of them paid little attention to prosodic elements, such as phrasing and using punctuation cues. Therefore, I chose to focus my intervention primarily in this area. I hoped that by helping them gain an awareness of syntax and expression, I would help them to improve their comprehension of text.

Richards (2000) defines prosody as “the ability to read a text orally using appropriate pitch, stress, and juncture; to project the natural intonation and phrasing of the spoken word upon the written text” (p. 535); she finds this to be a neglected element of fluency instruction. Phrases carry a deeper meaning than do individual words; therefore, the reader who processes larger units of text is able to draw more meaning from it (Pinnell et al., 1995; Taylor, Wade, & Yekovich, 1985).

Schreiber (1980) also found that readers must learn to group words
together in meaningful sequences. Referring to the work of Fries, he theorized that oral reading differs from speaking in that prosodic features are not present; the reader must rapidly supply the stresses, pauses, and tone sequences that are naturally present in speech. Part of learning to read is learning to compensate for the lack of these signals in print. Reading with appropriate phrasing—grouping the words together in meaningful units—is essential if comprehension is to occur. As Dowhower (1991) reported, reading in appropriate phrases is more important than merely fitting words together.

In addition to explicit instruction in prosodic elements, a number of other strategies have been shown to improve fluency of readers. One of these is having models for fluent reading (Chard, Vaugh, & Tyler, 2002; Keehn, 2003; Rasinski, 1989; Richards, 2000; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). Another effective strategy is repeated reading of text (Chard et al.; Dowhower, 1991; Keehn; Meyer & Felton, 1999; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski; Richards).

However, repeated readings can become dull for students; rehearsing a reading for performance gives repeated reading an authentic purpose, which makes it more motivating for the reader. Worthy and Broaddus (2002) and Rasinski (2000) believe that poetry is an excellent medium for reading performance. Choral reading of poetry helps students to hear the prosodic cues necessary for fluent reading (Richards, 2000). Direct instruction in using the elements of fluency also helps students to become more aware of these cues (Keehn, 2003; Rasinski, 1989; Richards).

Procedure

Subjects were members of two second-grade classes at a suburban school two miles from a large city. Prior to conducting a fluency intervention with students, I pretested their level of fluency using the NAEP's Integrated Reading Performance Record Oral Reading Fluency Scale (Pinnell et al., 1995, p. 15). Students were assessed while reading The Boy Who Ate Dog Biscuits (Sachs, 1989); the assessment was done during the second month of second grade, and its reading level was 2.2, according to the publisher. One quarter of the students read this with less than 90% accuracy. Because it is impossible to read text fluently when faced with such significant word recognition challenges, their data have been eliminated from this study. Of those who did read at their instructional level or better, three-quarters still did not read the text at a proficient level, according to the rubric.

No intervention was conducted in the classroom that contained the control group. In the classroom with the experimental group, two sessions on fluency development were presented. During the first classroom session, the class and I discussed fluency, much as I described at the beginning of this article. I told them that fluency was comprised of three elements: speed, phrasing, and expression. I then used an overhead projector to show a poem to students, and I asked them to read it silently. Next we chorally read the poem, with me sliding a pointer under the words to move the children at an appropriate pace. I
demonstrated two phrase boundaries to the children and marked them on the transparency. I then asked the children if they could find more "words that we would say together." We talked about what kind of expression might be appropriate for this poem; how did they think the author felt about the topic, and how could they show this with their voices?

I distributed to the class for discussion a "kid-friendly" version of the NAEP rubric that I had developed. (Figure 1). I stressed that a score of three meant "proficiency"—the level at which we want all students to read. A score of four was even better, but it did not mean that a reading was perfect. The class then listened to a tape of four adults reading a poem, and they evaluated each reading using the rubric. This started as a whole-class discussion, then moved to having the children decide upon a rating in small groups. The groups compared their ratings, often having to defend to others why they scored a reading as they did. As closure to the lesson, I had the students write the elements of fluency on the back of their papers.

The second lesson occurred a week later. I began by directing the students to think about the three elements of fluency we had previously discussed; they were to then whisper them to a neighbor before we reviewed them as a class. The rubric was again distributed to the students, and they were asked to reread it. We reread the poem from the previous lesson, with students being instructed to try to read the poem at level three. Students were divided into small groups, with each group being given a different poem. They were told to highlight all punctuation marks and to discuss the type of expression that they would use when reading the poem. They were given time to practice reading the poem in their small groups; during this time, I circulated around the room, monitoring and making suggestions. Finally, each group took turns reading its poem to the class, with the class scoring the reading according to the rubric. Children were to hold up the appropriate number of fingers to their chests, so that I could see their evaluations. Because the class had not used rubrics before, this was difficult for some students. Some wanted to score the readings based on their own subjective judgment, often giving their friends high scores and less popular children lower ones. I constantly brought them back to the language of the rubric and made them justify their scores based on that. I asked individuals to identify one thing that the group did well, and one thing that they could improve upon. We finished with one more choral reading of the original poem.

Students in both classrooms were individually post-tested using the same rubric and the next chapter of The Boy Who Ate Dog Biscuits.

Findings

In the class that received direct instruction in fluency, eight of the thirteen students made gains, and approximately three-quarters were able to read the grade-level text proficiently, according to the NAEP rubric. This represents marked improvement from the pretest results.

Informal observation showed improvement as well. At the end of the
first lesson, most of the students were able to identify at least two of the elements of fluency. Identification is certainly not the same as application; however, it is a beginning point. The choral readings done by the class sounded better with each repetition. In addition, the students showed enthusiasm for their reading.

The assessment results were not the same for the control group, which did not have the two classroom lessons on fluency. In this class, only two of the students made gains; however, three actually read the posttest less fluently than they did the pretest, which offset the improvement made.

Limitations and Discussion

This study provides interesting evidence, notwithstanding the small number of subjects involved. I would like to repeat it with more classes in the future, to see if the results replicate. I had planned to tape record the readings used for assessment in order to have these scored by an independent reviewer; however, difficulty with the taping and background noise made some of the recordings unusable. Another limitation was the class’s lack of familiarity with rubrics. The lessons sometimes lost focus as we discussed what a rubric was for and how to use it.

However, it appears clear that direct instruction in prosodic elements helps students to become more fluent readers. The children in the experimental group did not read more quickly after the lessons. They did read with more expression and more attention to punctuation. Some put words together in more meaningful phrases. Many managed to “make the reading sound more like talking.”

Future studies will add a comprehension component to the assessment. If reading fluently helps one to comprehend better, then there should be an improvement in comprehension as fluency improves.

Instruction in fluency, as with any other element of reading instruction, cannot be completed in two short lessons. It needs to happen on a regular basis, as a part of a comprehensive literacy program. However, this study demonstrates that improvements can be made without sacrificing a great deal of time, trouble, or expense. Reading poetry can be part of a class’s morning meeting, a small part of a thematic unit, or “filler” for those odd extra little moments in the classroom. Once the rubric has been taught and internalized, it can be hung in the room for easy reference. It is important for the teacher to continually use the language of instruction—speed, phrasing, punctuation, expression—to keep these elements fresh in the children’s minds.

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References


Figure 1

Reading Fluency Rubric for the Primary Grades

**Level 4**

- I always use punctuation to help me when reading.
- I read with expression.
- I almost always put words together in phrases.
- My reading flows smoothly.

**Level 3**

- I usually use punctuation to help me when reading.
- I usually read with expression.
- I sometimes put words together in phrases.
- I might have to reread a few times to work on words.

**Level 2**

- I need to use punctuation more.
- I used a little bit of expression.
- I didn’t use much phrasing.
- Some of my reading was smooth, but some was choppy.

**Level 1**

- I didn’t use punctuation to help me read.
- I didn’t use expression.
- My reading was word by word. I might have paused for a long time.
- My reading sounded choppy.

About the Author

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