

Developing Automaticity and Fluency by Rebecca Felton, PhD.

Introduction

For reading to be enjoyable, the reader must be automatic in his or her recognition of individual words so that attention is available for comprehension. In order to develop fluency and automaticity, it is necessary to practice the act of reading. Research indicates that good readers (who find it easy to recall sight words and to decode or sound out unfamiliar words) receive tremendous amounts of practice reading early in their school career. In contrast, poor readers (who have difficulty with word identification and decoding) find reading to be effortful and typically resist practicing reading. Consequently, they fail to develop the automaticity necessary for reading to become enjoyable. This cycle must be broken if poor readers are to become proficient readers.

General Principles of Instruction

The National Reading Panel evaluated research concerning the most effective ways for students to practice reading in order to achieve fluency. Two major approaches have been studied: (1) oral reading with guidance and feedback (repeated reading, assisted reading, paired reading) and (2) independent silent reading (e.g., Accelerated Reader, Sustained Silent Reading, Drop Everything and Read). Based on the review of current research, the National Reading Panel reached the following conclusions:

- Multiple readings of continuous text (Repeated Reading) can lead to improvements in reading speed, accuracy, comprehension and expression. This is true for non-impaired readers as well as students with reading problems.
- It is important to realize that this area has not been as thoroughly investigated as decoding and phonemic awareness. Therefore, these principles may be modified as additional studies are completed.
- Students should read materials that can be read accurately (90 to 95% accuracy). Material should be carefully selected so that the student is not frustrated by reading text that is too difficult.
- Material should be read three to four times for optimal benefit.
- In addition to reading continuous text, multiple readings of single words and phrases may improve fluency.
- Measures of rate and accuracy are both important benchmarks of improvements in reading fluency.
- Fluency training can be combined with strategies (e.g., vocabulary development) to enhance comprehension.
- Specific strategies for multiple readings should take individual student characteristics into account. For more impaired readers, provide more adult guidance during reading; use more decodable texts as reading materials; practice on words and phrases from the text before reading the text; practice reading short passages; model expressive reading.

- Short, frequent periods of fluency practice on a regular basis are most effective.
- Incentives for reading practice as well as concrete measures of progress (e.g., graphs of changes in rate and accuracy; records of number of stories/passages read) should be provided.

Instructional Strategies and Activities

IMPORTANT: After accuracy is established, provide fluency practice to develop automaticity in each component skill.

PRACTICE AT THE LEVEL OF LETTER-SOUND ASSOCIATIONS AND PATTERNS

In order to develop good decoding and encoding skills, students must first become automatic in their ability to associate letters and sounds for reading and writing. In the initial stages of developing accuracy in letter-sound associations, cues (such as picture cues and key words) are used (see unit 5).

PRACTICE AT THE WORD LEVEL

After accuracy for a particular type of word (e.g., closed syllables with consonant digraphs) is established, students determine their individual baseline times on appropriate word lists. It is very important for the teacher to promote an atmosphere of trust within the classroom so that each student is comfortable with this procedure. Students must recognize and embrace the concept of competing against themselves - not against each other. After the baseline is established, students practice in a variety of ways described below in the repeated reading strategies.

After students have developed automaticity in single patterns, patterns can be combined. For example, students can be given sets of words containing contrasting spelling patterns such as closed versus silent-e syllables (e.g., can versus cane). One useful strategy is to ask the student to first go through a list of words and mark the vowels as either long or short. An alternate strategy is to give the students a highlighter and ask them to highlight all of the words with the silent-e pattern. Whatever the specific strategy, the purpose is to focus the student's attention on the salient patterns. Prior to reading the words, the student may be asked to simply give the vowel sound for each word. After the patterns have been marked and practiced, the students are then timed on reading the set of words to establish a baseline. Then the set is practiced until mastered.

PRACTICE WITH PHRASES AND TEXT

Phrases which include both decodable and irregular sight words (e.g., on the mat; up a tree) can also be practiced in the same way. Selection of appropriate texts for fluency practice should be done by the teacher (rather than asking parents and students to pick out books). This is particularly true for the more impaired readers who should begin fluency practice with

decodable texts that provide the redundancy required for mastery. After students become proficient in reading a core set of irregular words and have mastered basic decoding skills it is appropriate to select non-decodable texts for fluency practice. Another option is to determine the readability level of existing literature. The teacher must be very careful to ensure that students are not asked to read materials below their independent reading level for fluency practice. The goal is for students to be reading materials that they can easily read accurately so the focus is on developing fluency.

MAKE THE READING EXPERIENCES LESS EFFORTFUL AND PAINFUL FOR THE STUDENT WHILE ENSURING REGULAR PRACTICE

Ideally, students should read with the teacher daily and practice at home daily. However, every effort should be made to avoid emotionally charged situations and reading practice with parents may not be possible for some children. Reading materials for practice should be carefully selected by the teacher and should be at a level of difficulty that allows the student to read most of the words accurately without a great deal of effort. The student should be prepared for the experience of reading in order to ensure success.

Ways to prepare the student include:

- Review and practice the word identification skills emphasized in the passage/story (put words and phrases on cards and practice reading several times).
- Review the vocabulary words (including proper names) in the story (practice the correct pronunciation and discuss the meaning).
- Discuss the story based on the pictures and title; ask the student to predict what will happen or what the story is about.

Ways to make the reading experience less painful include:

- Read the story (or portions) aloud to the student (modeling reading with expression) while the student follows the text with his or her eyes. Insist that the student actually looks at the words as they are read aloud (slide your finger along the line of text above the words). Use same procedure but ask the student to read out loud along with the adult.
- Read a story aloud and stop on particular words (e.g., words with the decoding pattern being emphasized or sight words the student is learning) and the student reads the target words. This requires the student to follow the text carefully and read only those words he or she knows.
- The adult and student take turns reading alternate sentences or paragraphs in the story.
- The student reads a portion of the story silently, discusses, and then reads a portion orally. Oral reading is more stressful and difficult than silent reading.
- Offer incentives for reading. Recognize that reading aloud may be one of the most difficult things you can ask the student to do. Therefore, give meaningful incentives for practicing. These should always include tangible evidence of progress such as graphs or charts showing the students' changes over time. Tapes of oral reading before and after practice or early and later

in the school year can be motivating. For some students, more concrete incentives may be necessary such as a point system leading to rewards, stickers, food, etc. Practice is so important that whatever incentives necessary should be utilized.

MODEL AND PRACTICE READING SENTENCES IN PHRASES AND WITH EXPRESSION

Reading accurately and reasonably fast is only part of the goal of fluency training. Students should also be taught to read in phrases and with good expression. One way of doing this is to model the process for the student and then provide supervised practice. One strategy often used in multisensory reading programs is to teach the student to slide their finger or the eraser end of a pencil under each phrase as it is read. Students can practice with different ways of dividing the sentence into phrases to determine which sounds best. Sentences can also be presented (e.g., on the overhead) to students with spaces between the phrases. For example:

Jack went to Sam's house after school to help him find his lost dog.

Another strategy is to write the phrases on individual cards and have students practice moving phrases around within sentences and then reading. For example;

After school Jack went to Sam's house to help him find his lost dog.

REPEATED READING STRATEGIES

Repeated readings can be done in a variety of ways including teacher directed group activities, students working with partners, and one-to-one adult-student activities.

Adult-Student Procedure

1. Select a short story or passage that student can read accurately.
2. Preview the story based on title and/or pictures. Preview vocabulary.
3. Adult reads story (or portion) aloud using good expression while the student looks at words being read (slide finger along the line of text above the words).
4. Adult and student read story (or portion) aloud together. This step may be repeated as needed until student can read independently.
5. Student reads aloud to adult and adult records time and errors on a simple graph. Student may practice silently between oral readings. Read same story or passage two more times with time and errors recorded.
6. This procedure can also be used with word lists. Teacher previews the skills being practiced

(e.g., syllable pattern; letter-sound association, etc.) and may point to words to help the student with pacing initially.

Small Group Instruction

1. Teacher selects appropriate reading material for each student.
2. Students read silently (or softly) for two minutes while teacher keeps time.
3. At the end of two minutes, mark place in book with pencil.
4. Students reread material for two minutes and mark with pencil. Then count number of additional words read on second reading.
5. Students read material third time reading aloud with expression (read to partners).

Follow up activities: Students take turns reading with expression to group; teacher models reading with expression

Partner Reading for Text

1. Teacher pairs students (stronger reader with weaker reader).
2. Set timer for 2 minutes and reader # 1 (stronger reader) reads passage.
3. Reset timer for 2 minutes (plus a few more seconds) and reader # 2 reads same material.
4. Reset timer and reader # 1 continues reading in story for another 2 minutes. Reader # 2 rereads material.

Follow up activities: Keep folders for each pair and give points for different components of process (keeping place, ready for reading, eyes on text, etc.). Keep lists of books read. Ask comprehension questions for the team after readings.

Partner Reading for Word Lists

1. Student reads a set of words (words that have been mastered for accuracy) and partner times for 60 seconds (lists may have to be read more than once to fill 60 seconds). Words that are difficult are underlined by reader. Number of words read is recorded. Student reads same words a second time and the number of words read in 60 seconds is recorded.
2. Student reader averages the number of words read and adds 5 or 10 to the average. This becomes the student's goal for that set of words. Progress is graphed each day until student reaches the goal set.

Establish Goals for Reading Rate

Short-term objectives should be set for individual students based on their own baseline performance. However, it is important for the teacher to have long-term goals in single word and text-reading fluency for their students. Such goals should take into account the student's age and the type of reading which is required. For single word reading (e.g., word lists or sets of words), the general goal is no more than one second per word. This is appropriate for students

in the third grade or higher.

For oral reading of text, a number of studies have provided general guidelines which are presented below (ranges in parentheses are from several different studies).

These rates are for students reading at their instructional level:

Grade 1 - 30 -50 words per minute (31-87)

Grade 2 - 100 wpm (52-102)

Grades 3 & 4 - 115 wpm (85-139)

Grade 5 - 120 to 150 wpm (78-124)

Another recommendation is for 100 - 180 words per minute for students in grades 3 to 8. These recommendations are for students reading text that can be read with few errors (independent or instructional level if support is provided). The following guidelines can be used to determine appropriate levels of text for fluency practice:

INDEPENDENT READING LEVEL - can be read without assistance and with 98 to 100% accuracy. Use for independent reading practice.

INSTRUCTIONAL READING LEVEL - can be read with assistance and with 95 to 98% accuracy. Use for assisted reading practice.

FRUSTRATION READING LEVEL - more than 95% error rate; too difficult for student and should not be used for fluency practice.

To determine reading rate (number of words read per minute), use this simple formula. Count the number of words in the passage, multiply by 60, and divide by the number of seconds the student took to read the passage. This procedure should be used with passages at the student's independent or instructional level.

Silent reading rates are slightly higher than oral rates in elementary school and increase slowly at the rate of about 10 to 20 words increase per year. One study found a range of 135 - 231 wpm for students in middle school. An average high school silent reading rate is around 200 words per minute. As students' reading involves more complex materials, reading rates will necessarily become slower to allow for comprehension.
