



A Focus on

Fluency



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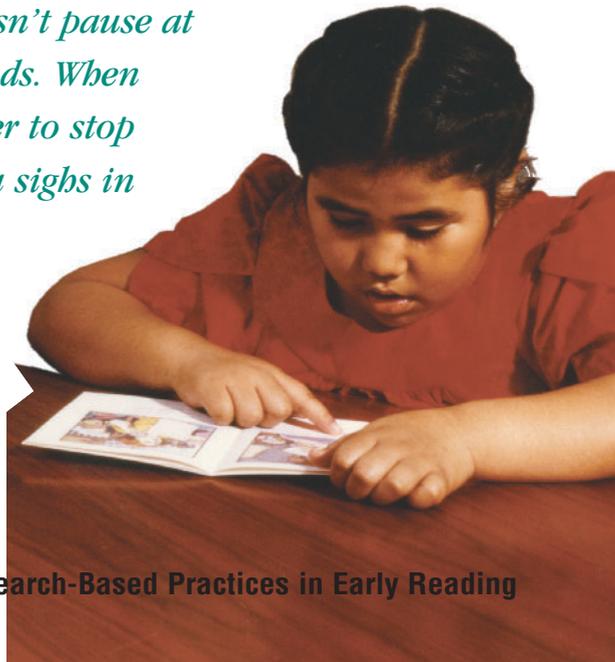
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A Focus on Fluency

*I*t's the beginning of the school year, and Mrs. Oshiro wants to know how fluently her 2nd graders read. One by one, she sits with students and listens carefully as each child reads aloud a passage from a story the class has already read and discussed. The first student, Kendra, reads the passage quickly and, it seems, effortlessly. She reads each word correctly. She pauses briefly after commas and at the ends of sentences. She reads with expression, as if she is talking. After the reading, Mrs. Oshiro asks Kendra a few questions to make sure that she has understood what she read.

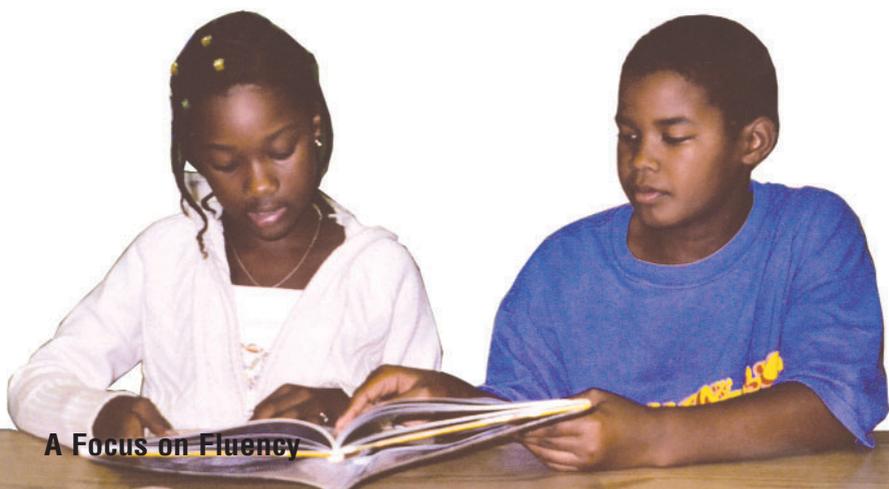
Mrs. Oshiro next sits with Samantha to read the passage. Unlike Kendra, Samantha struggles with the reading. She reads the passage in a slow and labored fashion. She stumbles over the pronunciation of some words, reads some words twice, skips others altogether, and occasionally substitutes different words for the words in the story. Although she pauses before pronouncing many of the words, she doesn't pause at commas and periods. When Mrs. Oshiro tells her to stop reading, Samantha sighs in relief.



Mrs. Oshiro faces a task that confronts most teachers: how to support students such as Samantha in becoming fluent readers. While instruction over the year needs to encompass aspects of reading such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, and comprehension, work to build fluency is especially important for struggling readers. Consequences can be dire for students who fail to become fluent readers: Students who do not develop reading fluency, regardless of how bright they are, are likely to remain poor readers throughout their lives (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Fluency, more often than not, has been neglected in reading instruction. Until recently, for example, most commercially published reading programs did not specifically include fluency instruction. This lack of instructional focus may help explain one of the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Pinnell et al., 1995): Forty-four percent of American 4th grade students cannot read fluently, even when they read grade-level stories aloud under supportive testing conditions.

Fortunately, researchers and practitioners have begun to focus increased attention on fluency and its contribution to reading success. The purpose of this report is to take a look at what research tells us about the importance of fluency and the factors that affect its development, as well as what is now known about effective fluency instruction.



What Is Reading Fluency?

Despite the increased interest in reading fluency, there remains no single agreed-upon definition for fluency. Some definitions stress the role of accuracy and automaticity in word recognition (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Samuels, 2002; Stanovich, 1991). In the *Literacy Dictionary*, fluency is defined as “freedom from word recognition problems that might hinder comprehension” (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 85). Meyer and Felton (1999) define fluency as the ability to read text “rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly, and automatically with little conscious attention to the mechanics of reading, such as decoding” (p. 284). Others stress the importance to fluency of the appropriate use of prosody, or spoken language features that make oral reading expressive (Allington, 1983; Dowhower, 1987; Schreiber, 1987).

The definition of fluency offered by the National Reading Panel (2000) takes into consideration the components of rapid and automatic word recognition and of prosody. According to the Panel, fluency is “the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression” (p. 3-1). Expanding this definition, *Put Reading First* (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001) explains that:

Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly. When fluent readers read silently, they recognize words automatically. They group words quickly in ways that help them gain meaning from what they read. Fluent readers read aloud effortlessly and with expression. Their reading sounds natural, as if they are speaking. (p. 22)

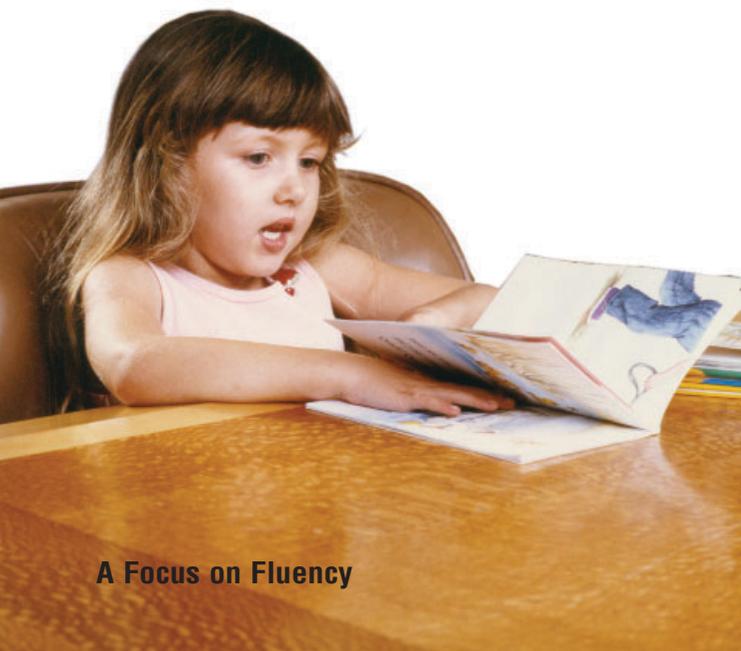
Whereas these definitions may clarify *what* fluency consists of, they do not explain *why* the components of word recognition and prosody are so important to fluency’s development.



Accurate and Automatic Word Recognition in Fluent, Meaningful Reading

Examining the role of automatic information processing in reading, researchers in the early 1970s focused first on word recognition (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). They pointed out that we can devote only a limited amount of attention to any given cognitive task. Attention we devote to one task is attention we cannot give to another. In reading, at least two cognitive tasks – word recognition and comprehension – compete for readers' attention. The more attention readers must give to identifying words, the less attention they have left to give to comprehension (Foorman & Mehta, 2002; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Samuels, 2002).

Fluency, it seems, serves as a bridge between word recognition and comprehension. Because fluent readers are able to identify words accurately and automatically, they can focus most of their attention on comprehension. They can make connections among the ideas in the text and between the text and their background knowledge. In other words, fluent readers can recognize words and comprehend at the same time. Less fluent readers, however, must focus much of their attention on word recognition. Because they cannot consistently identify words rapidly, they may read word-by-word, sometimes repeating or skipping words. They often group words in ways that they would not do in natural speech, making their reading sound choppy (Dowhower, 1987). The result is that non-fluent readers have little attention to devote to comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000).





For most readers, fluency develops gradually over time and through extensive reading practice (Biemiller, 1977-1978). In addition, readers' level of fluency varies, depending on their familiarity with the words in a text and with the text's subject. Even very skilled adult readers may read in a laborious manner when presented with texts that contain highly technical vocabulary and/or are about subjects of which they have little background knowledge, such as with medical textbook descriptions of surgical procedures (Armbruster et al., 2001).

Because beginning readers must put a great deal of effort into recognizing and pronouncing words, their oral reading is rarely fluent. However, even when children learn to recognize many words automatically and to read grade-level text at a reasonable rate, their oral reading still may not sound "natural," because they do not yet read with expression – or prosody.

Prosody in Fluent Reading

Prosody is a compilation of spoken language features that includes stress or emphasis, pitch variations, intonation, reading rate, and pausing (Dowhower, 1987; Schreiber, 1987). Prosodic reading reflects an understanding of meaningful phrasing and syntax (that is, the ways words are organized in sentences and passages) (Rasinski, 2000). It also reflects the reading cues provided by text features such as punctuation marks, headings, and the use of different sizes and kinds of type – for example, boldface or all capitals (Chafe, 1988).

The relationship of prosody to reading success has not been clearly established. However, just as the prosodic features help young children to understand and interpret spoken language – the messages conveyed through raised or lowered voices, emphasized words, and sentences spoken rapidly or slowly – so these features seem to help children get meaning from written language (Schreiber, 1987). For example, fluent readers understand that punctuation marks can tell them where and how long to pause and what kind of intonation to use to read a sentence. They also understand that text features, such as words in boldface or all capitals, can tell them where to place emphasis. They then use this information, rapidly and often without conscious attention, to construct meaning as they read (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Modeling Prosody in Fluent Reading

Teacher:

(Reads a line from a story): “The Prince should have been happy, but he wasn’t.” Did you hear how I grouped the words “The Prince should have been happy”? That’s because the words go together. And then I paused a little before I read the words “but he wasn’t.” This comma (*points to the comma*) told me to do that.

(Reads another line): “It’s the happiest day of my life!” the Prince laughed.” Did you hear how my voice got louder and more excited right here? That’s because the author put in this exclamation mark (*points to the exclamation mark*) to show how the Prince said the words.

On some reading assessments, elements of prosody are used to distinguish fluent from less fluent reading. For example, the four levels of NAEP's oral reading fluency scale distinguish word-by-word reading from reading that shows awareness of larger, meaningful phrase groups, syntax, and expressive interpretation (Pinnell et al., 1995). Similarly, Allington's (1983) six-point scale distinguishes word-by-word reading from reading in phrases that recognize punctuation, appropriate stress, and expression.

NAEP's Integrated Reading Performance Record Oral Reading Fluency Scale

Level 4

Reads primarily in large, meaningful phrase groups. Although some regressions, repetitions, and deviations from text may be present, these do not appear to detract from the overall structure of the story. Preservation of the author's syntax is consistent. Some or most of the story is read with expressive interpretation.

Level 3

Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrase groups. Some smaller groupings may be present. However, the majority of phrasing seems appropriate and preserves the syntax of the author. Little or no expressive interpretation is present.

Level 2

Reads primarily in two-word phrases with some three- or four-word groupings. Some word-by-word reading may be present. Word groupings may seem awkward and unrelated to larger context of sentence or passage.

Level 1

Reads primarily word-by-word. Occasional two- or three-word phrases may occur – but these are infrequent and/or they do not preserve meaningful syntax.

Note. From *Listening to Children Read Aloud* (p. 15), by U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995, Washington, DC: Author. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs95/web/95762.asp>

By 2nd grade, many students are on their way to becoming fluent readers. Rapid word recognition and familiarity with common text features have begun to come together so that these students read with comprehension. Some students, however, continue to struggle with reading. Although most students can benefit from fluency instruction, such instruction is crucial for struggling readers.