

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Reading Fluently Does Not Mean Reading Fast

Reading can be an effortless pleasure and a life-changing gift, and for many lucky people, this is exactly their personal experience with the act of reading. Unfortunately, for millions of others, reading is not a positive experience.

What we have learned from decades of research is that reading is a highly complex task that involves many interconnected and codependent linguistic processes that draw upon a variety of separate skills. When these various mechanics are well established, reading happens automatically and effortlessly. One of the essential skills that must be in place for efficient reading to occur is fluency. Unfortunately, many students struggle with fluency. In addition, there is a widespread misunderstanding about both what fluency is and the role it plays in skillful reading.

Defining Fluency

What is reading fluency? Many questions surround the definition of fluency as a concept, in part because fluency has many subtle mechanics that are interdependent and therefore difficult to separate. These mechanics, or skills, work together to enable fluent reading. Most definitions of reading fluency include three observable and measurable components: accuracy, rate, and expression (sometimes referred to as prosody).

Fluency may be defined as “reasonably accurate reading, at an appropriate rate, with suitable expression, that leads to accurate and deep comprehension and motivation to read” (Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2012, p. 13). In this definition, three elements are critical: accuracy, rate, and expression. Each of these elements, therefore, must be understood in turn.

Accuracy

Accuracy is the essential foundation of reading fluency. To be considered a fluent reader, reading must be accurate, first and foremost. The ultimate purpose of reading is always to comprehend what is being read. For a reader to understand what a text means, that text first must be read with a certain level of accuracy. This may sound simplistic. However, to read text accurately, a reader must be able to identify individual words accurately, which requires learning the alphabetic principle: that letters (graphemes) have associated sounds (phonemes) that need to be accurately identified and skillfully processed

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(decoding). Irregular words that cannot be decoded must also be read accurately. The recognition of common letter patterns as well as the correct spellings of words play crucial roles in accurate word reading. Then, once the word has been identified, its correct meaning must be accessed. For a truly fluent reader, accurate word identification and meaning happen simultaneously and instantaneously. Reading has become automatic.

Rate

Rate is often used mistakenly as a synonym for fluency. However, rate technically refers only to the *speed* with which students read text. Fluency is far more complex than rate alone. Another common fallacy about rate is that “faster is better,” although most teachers likely know from experience that this is not true. Most teachers have had experiences with students who read quickly but still may not have good comprehension. Speed alone does not facilitate comprehension, and a fast reader is not necessarily a fluent reader. In fact, fast readers may be reading inaccurately or simply reading too quickly to be able to think about what they are reading. The rate, or speed, at which text is decoded and recognized represents an important aspect of fluency and is linked to overall reading proficiency. However, reading fast is not the same as reading fluently.

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Expression

Expression is a component of oral reading that includes the pitch, tone, volume, emphasis, and rhythm in speech or oral reading. Another aspect of expression is a skillful reader’s ability to “chunk” words together into appropriate phrases. In some research on reading fluency, expression is referred to as prosody. There is only minimal evidence that expressive reading influences or mediates reading comprehension. Good expression may be an outcome of, rather than a contributor to, comprehension.

Further Qualifications

When fluency is defined as accurate reading, at an *appropriate* rate, with *suitable* expression that leads to accurate and deep comprehension and motivation to read, it is obvious that the italicized terms are rather vague. They imply that standards for accuracy, rate, and expression may, in fact, change from time to time or in different situations, which is exactly the point.

For example, when reading the directions on the label of prescription medication, we certainly need to read as accurately as possible. We would strive to be 100% accurate. We are likely going to slow down and even reread the directions more than once. If there is a word used in the directions that we do not understand, we will seek guidance and clarification. In this case, only highly accurate reading is reasonable, and slower reading is appropriate. Similarly, if we are studying challenging material for an important exam, we will want our accuracy to be as high as possible, and therefore our rate will likely be slower than when comprehension requirements are less demanding.

On the other hand, if we are simply skimming through a favorite magazine or perusing the newspaper, our accuracy levels may be significantly lower, and our reading rate may be higher than optimal levels, and both approaches are reasonable and appropriate. By the same token, in some situation, readers' expression might be exaggerated if they are reading a humorous piece of literature aloud to an audience or a group of friends. Clearly, different situations demand different emphases of the three components of fluency.

Reasonably Accurate

How accurate should we expect our students to be? What is "reasonable"? Precisely defined standards for reading accuracy have not been scientifically established. Comprehension of text is compromised when the percentage of accurately read words falls below 95%. When students' accuracy rates fall below 95%, additional diagnostic assessment may reveal underlying causes such as weak language skills, lack of vocabulary knowledge, or poor decoding and spelling ability.

Diagnostic processes help identify reasons for the errors being made and provide guidance for instruction to help improve reading accuracy. Research suggests that for younger emerging readers, acceptable levels for accuracy should be even higher (perhaps 97% to 98%) in monitored instruction or practice settings. In fact, in the early grades, accurate decoding is highly correlated with comprehension.

Appropriate Rate

Norms for oral reading fluency (ORF) as measured in words correct per minute (wcpm) have been established in research conducted over a 25-year period, the newest having been

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published in 2017 (www.brtprojects.org/publications/technical-reports/). Researchers generally agree that performance at the 50th percentile of these compiled ORF norms can serve as a reasonable benchmark for determining an appropriate reading rate. Unfortunately, some states and districts across the United States have used these norms to set their standards for reading fluency at the 75th percentile or even higher. Many school administrators also mistakenly believe that a higher ORF score is somehow “better.” Although that might sound like a good idea, in the case of reading rate, it isn’t.

Setting high standards for student achievement is usually an excellent thing to do. In many areas, higher or bigger or faster is definitely better. For example, having a higher IQ or being able to run, jump, or swim faster, higher, or longer is certainly better than lower scores in these areas. However, in the case of reading fluency, this notion is not correct.

Although there is no research or evidence from real-world practice to support the idea that reading faster has any long-term benefits, there is ample empirical evidence that it is important for students to maintain wcpm rates minimally at the 50th to 75th percentiles. Very few students will be able to achieve those highest rates; they and their teachers would likely become frustrated in the attempt. More important, there is no reason to believe that students’ reading success or enjoyment will substantially benefit if they do achieve this higher level. In other words, *students do not need to read as fast as possible to become good readers*. Students who read in the average range of ORF norms are on target to become effective readers; they are doing just fine. Fast reading is not the same as fluent reading.

Thinking about ORF scores like we think about blood pressure, body temperature, or cholesterol levels is preferable and more accurate. All three of these measures have established “norms,” and there are significant findings from medical research to indicate that it is important for healthy people to maintain their blood pressure, body temperature, and cholesterol at “average” or expected normative levels. Unlike IQ or athletic prowess, there is no benefit to having significantly higher (or lower) scores in these three areas.

Like blood pressure, body temperature, and cholesterol, ORF scores can serve as “indicators” of health and wellness, and scores at the “average” level are, in fact, optimal. As professional educators, we need to understand this correlation

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and challenge those who promote the incorrect notion that we should push students to read ever faster.

Suitable Expression

As with the other two components, there is no “one size fits all” tool for measuring optimal expression. There are times when, especially reading silently, expression is of little or no help to our understanding and enjoyment of the text. In silent reading, we simply want a reader to understand and attend to the diacritical markings of periods, commas, exclamation points, and quotation marks provided by the author to assist in the text interpretation.

In oral reading, expression is more evident. When oral reading sounds as effortless as speech, and mirrors the melodic features of spoken language, we can say that the reader is using suitable prosody or expression. However, as we mentioned previously, there may also be times when exaggerated prosody would be suitable. In theatrical performances or other entertainment venues, a reader might embellish a presentation with variations of pitch, intonation, phrasing, and pauses that would certainly not sound like normal speech but might be entirely appropriate for that occasion.

The Purpose of Fluency

Reading fluency is necessary for comprehension and motivated reading, having been described as a bridge between early and later reading phases. In early phases of learning to read, students develop oral language and phonemic awareness, learn to apply the alphabetic principle to increasingly complex words, and become familiar with more and more high-frequency words and build a large number of words that can be recognized instantaneously (sight words). Later reading phases are characterized by increased reading skills and deepening comprehension.

If readers do not develop adequate levels of fluency, they can become stuck in the middle of the bridge, able to decode words but with insufficient automaticity to adequately facilitate comprehension or enjoy the process of reading. These students typically become our reluctant readers, often with dire consequences for themselves, their future families, and society as a whole.

Another metaphor to describe the role of fluency is that of a doorway that leads to comprehension and increased motivation.

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If that “fluency door” is closed, then access to the meaning of print and the joy of reading remains effectively blocked. When the fluency door opens—that is, when a reader has developed sufficient fluency skills to read with appropriate accuracy and at a reasonable rate—then the reader can enter into understanding and motivation. Once that doorway has been opened, students can begin to access meaning even though they must also be taught vocabulary and comprehension strategies. However, if that fluency doorway is not open (because of inadequate levels of accuracy and rate), providing students with vocabulary and comprehension instruction will prove ineffective in helping them fully benefit from and enjoy the reading process.

Weak fluency skills can impede vocabulary development and comprehension in a process that has been referred to as the Matthew effect. The term is taken from a Biblical passage describing the phenomenon that “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” This dynamic readily applies to struggling readers who, early in the process of learning to read, begin to lag behind their peers.

In subsequent years, these students often fall even further behind because they simply read far less text. The good readers get “richer” because they are reading significantly more text than their less capable peers and thus deepening their decoding and word recognition skills, strengthening their automaticity, and increasing their vocabulary.

Students’ ability to become fluent readers depends significantly on learning to identify accurately large numbers of words by sight. Because words do not become sight words until they are read correctly many times, both inaccurate reading and minimal reading practice slow the development of fluency in beginning readers, often initiating a devastating cycle of failure.

Being a reading teacher is an exciting and demanding profession. There is so much to know about reading, how our students learn to read, and how best to teach the skills that will enable our students to become the readers we dream they will be. There is always something new to learn as ongoing advancements deepen our understanding and improve our teaching. Fluency is one of those reading skills that requires a deep understanding. The more we understand about reading fluency, the more our instruction can find a meaningful purpose: We become stronger teachers, and our students become skillful and motivated readers.

MOVING FORWARD

- Set reasonable expectations for students' reading accuracy, rate, and expression, taking reading level, words correct per minute, and type of text (e.g., expository, narrative, poetry) into consideration.
- Aim for students to read grade-level text aloud at around the 50th–75th percentiles, with accuracy and expression.
- Move toward having students be able to read aloud in a manner that mirrors spoken language.
- Practice reading text—carefully selected for at least 95% accuracy—through multiple reads. Pose a specific comprehension-focused purpose for each reading.
- Preview vocabulary through explicit decoding and discuss meaning. Model the reading of several sentences that use the vocabulary terms as a preview for the text, then have students practice reading the same sentences.
- Use partner reading or teacher-monitored oral reading in small groups.

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