

A Focus on Fluency

Michael F. Opitz

Smooth, expressive, accurate, and rate are four words that define fluency. Adding the phrase *with good comprehension* to these descriptors rounds out the definition of fluency and reminds us that reading comprehension, rather than fluency, is the ultimate goal. Fluency is a vehicle for meaningful reading. Research shows that fluency appears to be one contributor to good comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). In other words, fluent readers tend to read with a high level of comprehension.

While some students have little difficulty with fluency, others do. Fortunately, there are several systematic and explicit teaching techniques we can use to teach these students how to read fluently thus better ensuring their reading comprehension. There are also specific guidelines for effective fluency instruction.

First and foremost, students must develop a “fluency consciousness.” They need to develop an ear for what fluent reading sounds like and have a desire to be fluent.

Second, students need time to practice reading any given text if they are to become fluent. Repeated reading of the same text allows students to become more fluent with that one text and supports improved comprehension on other unrehearsed texts (Samuels, 1979).

Third, children need support if they are to improve their reading fluency. Teacher modeling, reader’s theater, and choral reading are three ways to provide such support (Allington, 2006).

Fourth, children need text that they can read with ease so that they can devote their attention to reading with appropriate expression, phrasing, and reading rate. They also can devote their attention to communicating the author’s intended meaning to an interested audience.

These four guidelines form the foundation of the fluency activities and instruction in a literacy program. During whole-group instruction, fluency lessons can focus on specific fluency skills. Teacher modeling is a major part of this instruction. After the teacher models how to use a specific fluency skill such as reading with expression, students join in by reading along with the teacher. This allows students to practice the skill while simultaneously receiving teacher support.



Fluency instruction is a critical part of Small-Group Strategic Reading instruction as well. As with whole-group instruction, each lesson can focus on a particular fluency skill. Students read texts that provide little difficulty in terms of decoding so that they can devote their attention to practicing the fluency skill. An accompanying fluency rubric and both literal and inferential comprehension questions enable teachers to use this text to assess students’ fluency and comprehension. Independent reading is an excellent time for students to work on reading fluently. Texts that students can read with relative ease give students a chance to build fluency on their own.

Finally, fluency practice can be integrated into a variety of literacy activities. For example, after students write their own compositions, they can be provided time to read their own writing aloud others. Students also can be asked to respond to a text by writing down an idea to share. They can then share their idea by reading it aloud. At still other times, students may choral read selections as an entire class. All of these activities provide meaningful ways for students to practice reading fluently.

Fluency, once a neglected part of reading instruction, is now recognized as a critical component to a comprehensive literacy program. We must make every effort to provide systematic and explicit fluency instruction designed to heighten students’ reading comprehension. We want students who read well, which means that they can read fluently and with excellent comprehension.

Indep

References

Allington, R. 2006. *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Programs*, 2nd ed. New York: Allyn & Bacon.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. 2000. *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Pikulski, J. & D. Chard. 2005. Fluency: Bridge Between Decoding and Reading Comprehension. *The Reading Teacher*, 58: 510-519.

Samuels, S. J. 1979. The Method of Repeated Readings. *The Reading Teacher*, 32: 403-408.

Samuels, S. J. 2002. Reading Fluency: Its Development and Assessment. In A.E. Fargstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction* (3rd ed., pp. 166-184). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

“Fluency, once a neglected part of reading instruction, is now recognized as a critical component to a comprehensive literacy program. We must make every effort to provide systematic and explicit fluency instruction designed to heighten students’ reading comprehension.”

Michael F. Opitz