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Orchestrating A Student's Reading Fluency in the Elementary Classroom

Sarah A. Yoder

University of Northern Iowa

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Orchestrating A Student's Reading Fluency in the Elementary Classroom

Abstract
As you listen to a piece of music, you hear the sound of instruments blending together to create a harmonious sound, to create a mood, or tell a story. With that same sense of coordination and ease a successful, fluent reader quietly orchestrates his/her reading to derive meaning from a text. It is common for teachers to have the goal of developing fluent, young readers in the elementary classroom, but it is often unclear how to go about obtaining this goal. This article is written for elementary teachers who want to foster fluent reading, but are unsure how to direct instruction and to select texts in order to support the development of fluent reading.

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Orchestrating A Student’s Reading Fluency in the Elementary Classroom

A Graduate Journal Article

Submitted to the

Division of Elementary Education

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Masters of Arts in Education

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Sarah A. Yoder

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Lynn E. Nielsen

Date Approved

Connie J. Erpelding

Date Approved

Rick Traw

Date Approved
Abstract

As you listen to a piece of music, you hear the sound of instruments blending together to create a harmonious sound, to create a mood, or tell a story. With that same sense of coordination and ease a successful, fluent reader quietly orchestrates his/her reading to derive meaning from a text. It is common for teachers to have the goal of developing fluent, young readers in the elementary classroom, but it is often unclear how to go about obtaining this goal. This article is written for elementary teachers who want to foster fluent reading, but are unsure how to direct instruction and to select texts in order to support the development of fluent reading.
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Introduction

A fluent reader is able to read a text accurately with ease while orchestrating a variety of reading skills. When this orchestration takes place, a reader is free to focus his/her attention on understanding what is being read, instead of spending time and energy on decoding a passage word by word. Elementary teachers want to encourage fluent reading, but often do not structure instruction to support it. The purpose of this research option is to write a journal article for elementary teachers who want to foster fluent reading in the elementary classroom. It will detail ways to direct instruction in order to support the development of fluent reading, while also pointing out text characteristics to look for when selecting books for fluency instruction.

Methodology

Reading fluency was the topic chosen for this research option because it is a current issue coming to the forefront of reading instruction. Most recently the Partnership for Reading’s initiative, Put Reading First (2001), identified fluency as one of the five main components of reading instruction. It is a component of reading instruction that is often deemed important, yet is not honored with the attention it deserves in elementary classrooms.

The steps completed to write a journal article on this topic began with communication with the graduate advisor. Following topic approval from the advisor, the author gathered research from peer reviewed journals and recently written books on the topic of fluency. Books and journal articles were gathered from the University of Iowa library and The University of Northern Iowa library. Online journal articles were
obtained using an Ebsco search. The author also attended sessions on reading fluency at the International Reading Association’s Plains Conference in Des Moines, Iowa.

Following the gathering of valuable research, the author secured the Instruction for Authors from the Reading Teacher, a journal of the International Reading Association. The Reading Teacher is a peer-reviewed journal with an open forum designed to present thoughtful insights on current practices, issues, and trends in the field of reading and literacy education.

The writing process for this project began during the summer of 2003. In conjunction with Seminar class, an outline for the paper and guiding questions were completed to align the focus of the paper. The original decision was to center the focus of the article on four areas: defining fluency, describing strategies to teach fluency instruction, detailing specific types of texts in order to support fluency instruction, and ways to assess progress in fluency development. After the research began, the author decided to eliminate information on assessing fluency instruction because most of the research on this area leads to commercialized products to assess fluency.

Manuscript

Tim, is a first grade Title 1 student who struggles as a fluent reader. His reading is slow and laborious, affecting his comprehension. He often reads texts word by word, disregarding punctuation and phrases. He is characteristic of many of the young readers today who are not exposed to fluency instruction in the elementary classroom. He has become a reader who reads words as if they were in list from; reading with no expression,
intonation, and life to his reading.

“I/ w- wave/ to/ my f-fr-iend,/ the/ mail/man/” said/ the/ boy.

Tim was able to read this text with 100% accuracy but when asked what the story was about, he was slow to recall text details because so much of his attention was spent on decoding the text, not understanding what he was reading. Readers like Tim are becoming all too common in elementary classrooms. Taking time to addressing fluency in the classroom is one major way to support readers who struggle to put it all together so the text can be read and understood easily. With the implementation of some simple fluency activities, students like Tim can develop into fluent readers, reading text in phrases while changing emphasis and tone as they reads. With strong models of fluency and time for repeated readings, Tim can become a reader who reads with ease and enjoyment, like so:

“I wave to my friend,/ the mailman”/ said the boy.

Introduction

A fluent reader is able to read a text accurately with ease while orchestrating a variety of reading skills. When this orchestration takes place, a reader is free to focus his/her attention on understanding what is being read, instead of spending time and energy on decoding a passage word by word. Elementary teachers want to encourage fluent reading, but often do not structure instruction to support it. The purpose of this
article is to offer support for elementary teachers who want to foster fluent reading in the elementary classroom. The article will detail ways to direct instruction in order to support the development of fluent reading, while also pointing out text characteristics to look for when selecting books for fluency instruction.

Definition of Fluency

Richard Allington (1993) coined fluency as “the neglected reading goal.” He states, “The lack of fluency in oral reading is often noted as a characteristic of poor readers, but it is seldom treated” (p.556). This neglect to teach fluency is an issue being brought to the forefront of reading instruction. In today’s classrooms it is becoming evident that fluency should be an important part of the reading curriculum, yet time dedicated to addressing this issue is lacking. The Partnership for Reading (2001), based on the finding of the National Reading Panel Report (2000) has deemed fluency as one of the five key elements of reading instruction in order to successfully teach children to read.

The National Reading Panel (2000) defines fluency as “the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression.” In conjunction, The Literacy Dictionary’s definition of reading fluency (as cited in National Reading Panel, 2000) states, “Fluency is the freedom from word identification problems that might hinder comprehension” (p.3-6). When students read quickly, accurately, and with natural expression, they are free to understand what they are reading.

Reading research defines dysfluency as a breakdown in lower level processing (Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001). Dysfluent readers slowly retrieve information to make
connections between meaning and the words on the paper. They often read word by word, something LaBerge and Samuals (1974) compare to watching characters in a play one-by-one and disregarding the interactions with other characters.

The goal of a reading program should include fluency instruction in order to foster early reading development. When teachers promote fluency in the elementary classrooms, students are able to see and understand what reading really is and what it entails.

**Strategies to Teach Fluency**

The idea that fluency is an important key to successful reading instruction is strongly supported by the research (National Reading Panel, 2000; Partnership for Reading, 2001; and Snow, C., Burns, S., & Griffin, 1998). It is the job of educators to demonstrate fluency in their own reading and to foster the same in students. Rasinski & Padak (2002) conclude, “It is not enough for students to become proficient in word decoding. They need to read with meaning...fluent reading is accurate, quick, expressive, and above all, meaningful. If we want students to become fluent readers, they need a model of what fluent oral reading sounds like” (p.162). In simple terms, if educators want students to be fluent readers extracting more meaning from the text, then it must be taught in the classroom. Addressing fluency in the classroom brings new life to texts while supporting the joy of reading and helping the student feel successful as a reader.

Forms of modeling and rereading are proven to be the two main ways of fostering reading fluency (Blevins, 2001, Koskinen, P & Blum, I., 1986, National Reading Panel.
When teachers read aloud daily to their students, they find ample opportunities to model what fluent reading sounds like. By modeling fluent phrasing and using proper expression during a read aloud, teachers provide a strong model for students to hear how written text can come alive during reading.

One way I have found to enhance modeling through read alouds is by encouraging students (both fluent and nonfluent) to be reflective after hearing a story. After reading aloud a text, I model the process of being reflective of my own reading by using a think aloud strategy and comment on the following points:

*“Hmm, how did I sound as a reader?” I think that I sounded like Froggy talking to his dad when I said, “Oh, pleeeeasssse! I want to do it all by myself!”

* “Did I read the text too fast or too slow? I think that when I read this page, I read a little too slow, kind of like a robot would sound if he were talking. I will try it again so it sounds smooth, like someone having a conversation.”

* “Froggy sounded really happy to show his mom the mud pie he made her. I made my voice sound like him when I read. “I made it all by myself!” I even saw the exclamation point at the end of his sentence. I read that with excitement!”

In pointing these reading characteristics, teachers can engage students in a reflective process, modeling self-evaluation. When students hear me evaluate my reading aloud, they pick up on the importance of evaluating themselves as reader. Students can begin to contemplate their own reading asking themselves: “Am I reading too fast or too slow?” “Am I expressive when I read certain punctuation marks?”, “Am I inflecting my
voice to sound like the characters are talking?" Overall, this reflective process involves students taking on active, meaningful role as a reader and in turn, reading becomes meaningful.

In addition to modeling, repeated reading is another strategic technique developed to foster reading fluency. This technique was developed and is well supported by researchers (Dowhower, 1991; Koskinen & Blum, 1986; National Reading Panel, 2000; Partnership for Reading, 2001; Rasinski, T & Padak,N., 2000; and Samuels, 1997). Repeated readings provide students with the opportunity to read the same passage orally several times. Samuels (1997) states, “The repeated readings technique was based on the automaticity theory, which suggests fluent readers are those who decode text automatically, leaving attention free for comprehension” (para. 1). When students read a passage a few times (a text selected on an appropriate reading level) they are able to increase the speed of word recognition, as well as enhance their understanding of the text and increase vocabulary skills.

Repeated readings can take on many forms in the elementary classroom. A unique form of repeated reading is paired reading. Paired reading (Koskinen & Blum, 1986; Partnership for Reading, 2001; and Rasinski & Padak, 2001) is a form of repeated reading, only it involves reading aloud while developing fluency, word recognition, and providing feedback to a partner. During paired reading, a student is paired with another student (either of contrasting or similar ability). During this process, the partners self-select a passage or a story with about 50-75 words. Both practice their passage silently and then take turns reading aloud to each other while the other listens with a critical ear.
The reader can read the passage up to three times, allowing time for evaluation after each reading. The activity below details two second grade readers (of contrasting ability) during a paired reading activity.

Adam read a few pages of the Ugly Duckling aloud to Molly. Following the read he asked:

Adam: “How did I sound?”

Molly: “I like the way your voice sounded sad like the Ugly Duckling when you read, ‘I must be very ugly.’ But, I do think you read like robot on page 161, can you try that again?”

Adam reads the passage for the second time.

Adam: “How did I sound this time?”

Molly: “I think you sounded better this time. You sounded more natural. I think you can read it one more time and put it all together.”

Adam reads the passage for a third time.

Molly: “Wow! You sound like a good reader! I like how you made your voice sound like the goose, hen, and dog talking in the story!”

Then the roles are switched and Molly reads a different passage aloud to Adam.

Yet another variation to this activity is Readers Theater, which involves students performing a play, minus all of the extras (costumes, props, sets, etc.). This unique teaching strategy involves students reading specific parts rather than memorizing texts. During this activity, small or whole groups of students read selected parts from a scripted text. It is an excellent way to reach the needs of all students, regardless of reading ability or skill in fluency. This strategy encourages students to focus on their voice and the interpretation of the text, rather than decoding it word by word. It can be used as an
instructional tool to challenge all types of readers, while encouraging and enticing the act of reading.

A group of first graders performed the readers theater play, Three Billy Goats Gruff, toward the end of the school year. The group was made up of various levels of reading, and all levels participated in the play. Anthony, a resource student, was most proud to perform the part as the Bridge. His important reading role was “Trip, trap. trip. trap, trip. trap” each time a Billy Goat would cross the bridge. Anthony felt just as successful as the highest ability student in the class because, he held a script, participated in all of the practices, and was a hit with his peers after vibrantly and fluently reading his part as the Bridge.

The benefits of these strategies (teacher modeling, repeated reading, paired reading, and Readers Theater) shine through during independent reading. Independent reading is time for a student to orchestrate all they have learned about reading fluency and to put it to the test. It is the time of day when students practice reading, and teachers are free to monitor, coach, and assess a child’s independent reading ability.

**Authentic Texts to Develop Fluency**

Selecting materials to help develop fluency is pertinent to fluency instruction. Finding texts which naturally lend themselves to fluency development will allow ample opportunity for students to read text in a phrased, fluent manner and will determine student success in reading.

When selecting text, which naturally lends themselves to be strong, independent models or practice for fluency instruction, teachers must first select books with
appropriate text levels. An appropriate text level will allow less time for decoding work and will free up more time and energy on meaning. An appropriate text level for fluency instruction should be on a student’s independent reading level, meaning they should be able to read it with a 95% accuracy rate or above (Partnership for Reading, 2001). When the text used for fluency instruction is on student’s independent level, the student is free to orchestrate fluent behaviors rather than to spend time and energy decoding words.

After finding an appropriate text level for the student, it is important to note the characteristics of a text. Books with natural language patterns, receptive texts, rhyming words naturally support a reader to anticipate text when reading. Poetry books and Readers Theater scripts are also excellent tools for students who need help with fluency development. Table 1.1 includes a book list of titles categorized by text characteristics.

Texts with natural language patterns lend themselves to independent fluency development. Conversational pieces included in a storyline, lend themselves to natural expression, tone, and rate. Using these texts, students are free to explore different tones, expressions, and emotions portrayed by the author. Books including natural language patterns encourage a reader to pay attention to punctuation. Punctuation marks give clues to the reader as to what tone and intonation to use when reading a text silently or out loud. The story, *Are You My Mother,* by P.D. Eastman (1960) includes an example of this type of text characteristic:

> Then he came to a dog. “Are you my mother?” he said to the dog.
> “I am not your mother.” I am a dog,” said the dog.
When a student reads this type of text, they are able to add life to conversations taking place in stories. The text and characters come alive during reading.

Another type of text that supports fluency development is repetitive texts. This type of text includes phrases repeated throughout the text, allowing for an element of predictability so the reader can anticipate phrasing. These types of books are usually familiar books, often used for shared reading. Repetitive texts support automatic reading because they include words or phrases that appear multiple times within the text. Think of how easy it is for young children to fluently read, “Five little monkeys jumping on the bed. One fell off and bumped his head.” Repetitive texts are excellent tools for modeling rate and intonation.

Rhyming texts also lend themselves to fluency instruction. These types of texts include phrasing which include rhyming words that help students rely on a predictable text pattern. When a student picks up this type book, he or she is able to rely on the syntactical (meaning) clues presented in the rhyming patterns in order to speed up their decoding process. When a student is reading, Mrs. McNosh Hangs Her Wash., (1998) they can anticipate what word will be coming next because they can rely on rhyming words in the story to help them read the upcoming words. For example:

She hangs up a kite by the tip of its tail.
The postman arrives and she hangs up the mail.

Poetry is another way to integrate repeated readings into the curriculum. The rhythmic pattern of poetry presents ample opportunity for students to practice rate,
intonation. and reading with expression. Poetry requires expressive reading and dramatic interpretation, allowing the student to interact with text in a different way.

During a fall unit a second grade class read the poem, Pumpkin Picking (Fleming, 2000). This poem details the joy of going to a pumpkin field to pick out the perfect pumpkin. The poem comes alive for the students when they read:

Let's go picking in the pumpkin patch.
Now we are jiggling the old gate latch.
Gate swings wide and we step inside.
Pumpkins spread like an ocean tide.
You take the one like a fat balloon.
I'll take the one like an orange moon.
Hike to the house in fifty paces.
Then we'll carve out the pumpkin faces.

-Sandra Liatos

Following independent reads and partner re-reads of this poem, not only do students have a chance to practice fluent reading, but there is a rich discussion on a few of the poem's vocabulary words (latch and paces) and a mini lesson on analogies.

**Orchestrating Instructional Experiences for Fluency**

When a student reads a text with ease, it is because they are recognizing words automatically, understanding what they are reading, and demonstrating all that they know about reading. They are free to make connections between what they are reading and real life experiences, making reading enjoyable and meaningful.

Fluency development in the elementary classroom is critical as young readers increase their sight word vocabulary and develop reading strategies. Teachers can focus attention to fluency development by introducing activities such as paired reading, repeated reading, and Readers Theater. Just as important as these activities are to fluency
development, the texts selected to accompany the fluency activities is critical. Careful selection of appropriate books will help teachers support the development of fluent readers in the elementary classroom.

The end goal of fluency instruction is to produce readers who read effortlessly while comprehending text. Chances are, when Tim finds reading easy and effortless, he will enjoy the task of reading, as will other students in elementary classrooms. Fluency instruction can help foster the love of reading, supporting life long readers.
Table 1.1

Book list of text that will support fluency development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural Language Patterns</th>
<th>Book Title and Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are You My Mother?, P.D Eastman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hey Little Ant, Phillip Hoose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hattie and the Fox, Mem Fox</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am the Dog, I am the Cat, Donald Hall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell Me a Story Mama, Angela Johnson</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repetitive Text</th>
<th>Book Title and Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Five Little Monkeys, Eileen Christelow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Little Red Hen, Joy Crowly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gingerbread Boy, Paul Galdone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Napping House, Audrey Wood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Bear, Brown Bear, Eric Carle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take Me Out of the Bathtub, Alan Katz</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhyming Text</th>
<th>Book Title and Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss McNosh Hangs Her Wash, Sarah Weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish, Dr. Seuss</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumble Bumble, Felicia Bond</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumble in the Jungle, Giles Andreae</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Today I Feel Silly, Jamie Lee Curtis</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poetry</th>
<th>Book Title and Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Random House Book of Poetry for Children, Jack Prelutsky</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Pizza The Size Of The Sun, Jack Prelutsky</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where The Sidewalk Ends, Shel Silverstein</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids Pick the Funniest Poems-Poems that Make Kids Laugh, Bruce Lansky</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Book of Book of Rhymes, Songs, Poems, Fingerplays, and Chants, Silbert and Schills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Poetry Party, Bruce Lansky</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reader's Theater</th>
<th>Book Title and Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stories on Stage: Scripts for Reader’s Theater, Aaron Shepard</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Readers Theater for Beginning Readers, Suzanne Barchers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Multicultural Folktales for the Felt Board and Readers’ Theater, Oryx Sierra</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A Reader’s Theatre Treasury of Stories, Win Braun</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Folk Tale Plays from Around the World that Kids Will Love, Marci Appelbaum and Jeff Catanese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frantic Frogs and Other Fractured Folktales for Readers Theatre, Anthony Fredricks</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
References


Eastman, P. D. *Are you my mother?* Toronto, Canada: Random House, Inc.

Fleming, M. (2000). *Poem of the week: 50 irresistible poems with activities that teach key reading and writing skills...and inspire a love of poetry all year long.* New York: Scholastic.


Conclusion and Recommendations

The review of literature stresses the importance of fluency instruction in the elementary classroom. Fluency is coined the neglected goal, implying the lack of time addressed to this issue in elementary classrooms. It was apparent through this process, that educators need more guidance on how to teach fluency in the classroom. Fluent readers need to be exposed to forms of modeling and rereading in the classroom; offering them consistent opportunities to practice fluent reading.

The process of writing a journal article for a graduate project was in-depth, challenging, and insightful. The author accomplished the goal of writing an article to inform teachers of ways to address reading fluency in the classroom, instead of disregarding it. Throughout this process, it was insightful to read research which supports the important fact that fluency is the glue that solidifies the skills of a good reader.

The information gathered for this project is valuable information for classroom teachers, as well as remedial reading teachers. The information presented for educators is valued and supported by reading research. The composed article presents educators with practical and useful ways to foster fluency development.

Fluency is a current issue being studied in the reading field and its implications will continue to be studied amongst researchers. As the invested interest in fluency continues, it is possible that fluency may someday be coined “the accomplished goal.”
Appendix A

Author/Publication guidelines can be found at:

http://www.reading.org/publications/rt/rt_infoauthors.html
A fluent reader is able to read a text accurately with ease while orchestrating a variety of reading strategies. When this orchestration takes place, a reader is free to focus his/her attention on understanding what is being read, instead of spending time and energy on decoding a passage. It is common for elementary teachers to have the goal of developing fluent readers, but it is often unclear how to obtain this goal. The purpose of this article is to inform elementary teachers of ways to foster fluency development while detailing types of texts to select for fluency instruction.