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# Teaching Students About Reading: A Fluency Example

Charles H. Clark

The purpose of this article is to discuss the elements of reading instruction which are necessary for success with students who have not benefited from indirect or implicit instruction. Most articles which cover this ground do so in terms of comprehension (Dole, Duffy, Roehler and Pearson, 1991; Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick and Kurita, 1989; Spiegel, 1992) or, more rarely, word and letter identification (Cunningham and Cunningham, 1992). Reading fluency, often perceived as a rather mechanical skill, is generally ignored in the literature on modern effective instructional techniques, despite its importance. Many of the proven instructional techniques for fluency are described elsewhere (Allington, 1983; Anderson, 1981; Dowhower, 1989; Henk, Helfeldt, and Platt, 1986; Koskinen and Blum, 1986; Moyer, 1982; Rasinski, 1989), but they are treated as stand-alone methods without the integration of comprehension, metacognitive knowledge, and student insight which are considered absolutely essential for long-term success.

Effective instruction has a number of universal characteristics (Delpit, 1988; Dole et al., 1991; Spiegel, 1992). Several of those will be focused on here and fluency instruction will be discussed with those characteristics in mind. First, effective

instruction involves high but achievable expectations. The teacher must know what the students are capable of, help them on their journey to achieve the goals, and clearly expect the students to be successful. Second, effective instruction is direct and explicit. While it is true that many students learn from indirect and implicit instruction, it is also true that they learn more efficiently from direct and explicit instruction (Pressley et al., 1989). On the other hand, many students do not learn well from indirect and implicit instruction, though they are perfectly capable of learning through more direct and explicit instruction (Delpit, 1988; Dole et al., 1991; Duffy, Roehler, Sivan, Rackliffe, Book, Meloth, Vavrus, Wesselman, Putnam, and Bassiri, 1987; Spiegel, 1992). Special education students and others who have trouble reading particularly benefit from direct explicit instruction. Third, the tasks that the students engage in to learn and practice should be meaningful and functional for them. If students feel that a task is not personally relevant, that it seems to have no relationship to what they know of the world, or that it will not be useful, they are less likely to attend to the instruction and the tasks, they will be less motivated to participate, and they are less likely to apply the information in other situations. The purposes for reading, learning to read, and for the tasks involved in both must be authentic and real.

One important aspect of high expectations in reading instruction is understanding what it is that readers should be doing to be successful (what good readers do and what it is that makes them good readers). For the most part, this knowledge is currently available to teachers and is a constant theme of articles appearing in many readily available journals. However, not only is it crucial for teachers to understand how reading develops and what makes someone a good reader, it is also equally important for teachers to convey that information to their students. All students at some point

have a goal of becoming expert readers. One of the easiest ways to make reading instruction more meaningful and functional is to help students understand what it is that they are expected to be able to do in order to become good readers and how to get there (Duffy, et al., 1987). The instruction and tasks that students are engaged in must be perceived by them as important for achieving this goal. Regretfully, meaningfulness and functionality is often interpreted as entertainment. Learning and practice does not have to be fun to be motivating, and pointless fun will not motivate for long. Meaningfulness and functionality derive from two principles. The first is that something is perceived as meaningful and functional when it is understood to help a student reach a goal. This is one of the reasons it is so important to teach students about reading and learning to read. The second principle is that the goal itself and the tasks used to reach that goal must be authentic, relevant to the student, and the relationship between the goal and the tasks must be obvious.

Helping students understand what is expected of them and helping them see the value of instruction and instructional tasks are crucial elements in direct explicit instruction (Delpit, 1988; Dole, et al., 1991; Duffy, et al., 1987; Spiegel, 1992). The first step is explaining to the students what it is they are to learn, what their goals will be, how they will be taught, and how they are expected to learn. The strategy is then demonstrated (modeled) and discussed, after which students are engaged in tasks which will promote their learning and mastery under the guidance of the teacher. Thus, effective instruction requires the teacher to explain to the students what is expected of them, to demonstrate the strategy, and then to involve the students in meaningful and functional practice.

Following is a discussion of instruction in oral reading fluency. It is used to demonstrate how the above

characteristics can be integrated into instruction. Fluency is a crucial aspect of learning to read. It helps students understand the function of automaticity in learning to read, the integration of comprehension and word identification, and the role and value of reading and writing as communication and entertainment.

### **A fluency example**

The origin of the word *fluency* is the Latin word *fluens*, which means to flow. A reader who is fluent reads smoothly and effortlessly: the reading flows. This smoothness and effortlessness are dependent upon the reader being automatic at word identification and at comprehension to the point where it is possible to read with meaningful expression. Full comprehension requires attention and cannot be automated, but the phrase-level comprehension needed for expression can become automatic (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974).

The fluent reader sounds good, is easy to listen to, and reads with enough expression to help the listener understand and enjoy the material. This requires an intelligent interpretation of the text, with meaning as the guide to intonation and expression. The best fluent readers convey this meaning and their own sense of enjoyment of the text to the listener. It is these aspects of good oral reading which make it a performance activity. Obviously, this is almost impossible unless the individual has read the text prior to the oral reading: even good readers cannot attend to the comprehension, word recognition, and the performance aspects simultaneously.

A lesson on fluency instruction should begin with the definition of automaticity, fluency, and performance reading and a demonstration by the teacher. Automaticity should be defined as knowing how to do something so well that you don't have to think about it (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974). An

adult example is driving a car. Many of us occasionally find ourselves at home without remembering beginning the trip. A universal example is our receptive and expressive language. We speak without thinking about forming the words or constructing sentences; we think only of the message we wish to convey. Children also experience automaticity in athletic activities, such as bicycle riding, and everyday activities such as eating. Bicycle riding is a good initial example to use. Most students can remember learning how, they can remember when they needed to think about each element of bicycle riding, and when they felt awkward and often made mistakes. The same principle applies to reading. When you are just learning, you will be awkward, you will make mistakes, and you will need to think about letters and words. The only way that humans become automatic at something is through practice (and lots of it: remember how much time you spent driving), whether the goal is riding a bicycle or reading. Good readers are fluent because they are automatic at all of the lower-level aspects of the task (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974). They become automatic through practice, and in order to practice they had to want to read and they had to have opportunities to read (Stanovich, 1980).

A crucial related point here is that students should not be asked to read materials which are too difficult or uninteresting. The former will affect the sense of success and the fluency, while the latter will decrease the likelihood of enthusiastic practice. Students should be allowed to choose books themselves and encouraged to pick their favorites. They often get the most enjoyment from becoming successful with a book they've heard the teacher read in class or one which they've enjoyed reading over and over. Though some teachers are afraid that this familiarity will decrease student growth, just the opposite is true. Such student-oriented selections will actually improve motivation and speed the

development of reading. We often do more harm than good by worrying about constantly challenging students, particularly students who are learning disabled and others who have experienced repeated failure.

Appropriate fluency work is particularly effective in helping these students understand and develop automaticity. Much of this fluency instruction is best organized in brief mini-lessons, followed by meaningful and enjoyable opportunities to practice. The mini-lessons can be done with the whole class, with small groups, or with individuals. In a regular classroom, whole class and small group instruction will be the norm, while in special education and Chapter 1 classes small group and individual instruction will be more common. Whatever the format, the content of the lessons will be essentially the same. The first goal is to help the students understand what fluency is and how it relates to good reading, as described above. The next step is to help the students set their own expectations and goals and to provide them with techniques and practice which will enable them to achieve those goals.

### **Expectations, goals, and techniques**

Setting the expectations for fluency is easy. Probably all teachers reading this article read to their students every day. When you do so you are modeling fluent reading (Perez, 1986). The students may not, however, think about that aspect of your reading, so it needs to be discussed. During your daily reading, you should talk about fluency how you achieve it and why it is important.

In fluency work, expectations play two roles. First, the students need to be constantly reminded of the goal of fluency practice and the fact that they can achieve fluency. Second, in order for students to be able to self-monitor their oral reading, they must have a model voice in their heads to which they

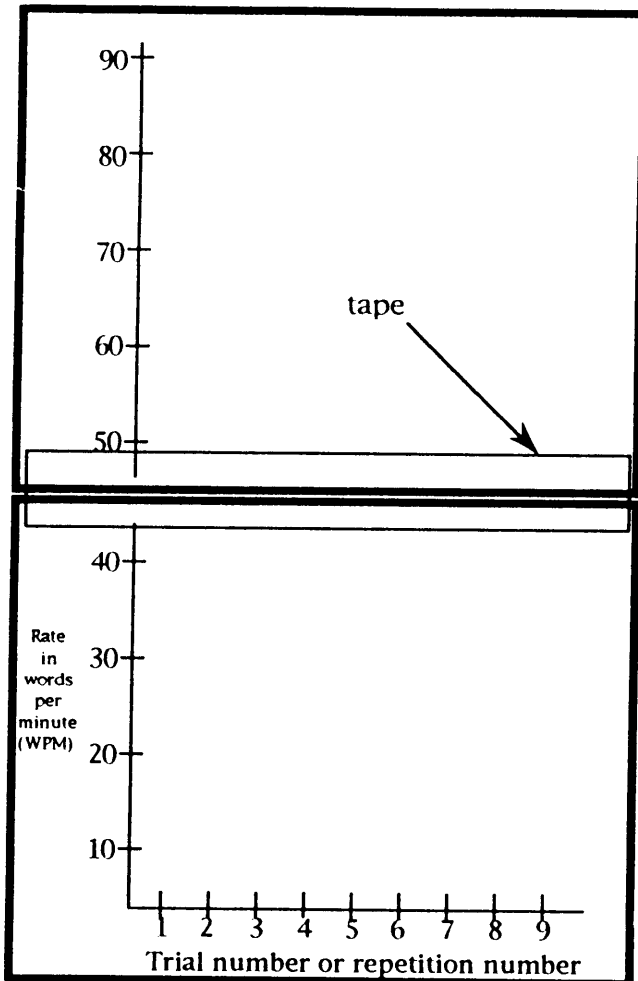
can refer. The model voice can be the teacher's, but it is also important to encourage students to use other figures for models, such as television personalities, readers of commercially available recorded books, adults from the community who come to read to the students, etc. When students know they should have model voices stored in memory to use for self-monitoring they treat the listening experience differently and they consciously think about how they are going to achieve their goals. Of course, students need to add their own voices to this bank of stored fluent readers as they meet with success. Frequent use of tape recorders during practices and performances will help students develop their own personal voice and style.

Once the students understand what fluency is and they have begun to focus on it as an important and achievable goal, it is time to give them techniques which will make them successful. Probably the most important technique is repeated readings, which has been discussed in a number of other articles (Dowhower, 1987, 1989; Henk, et al., 1986; Koskinen and Blum, 1986; Moyer, 1982). Basically, repeated readings involves reading the same text over and over while recording the rate on a graph or chart. This accomplishes a number of important instructional objectives. First, students become focused on their own mastery of the task and competition with their own past performance (Ames, 1990; Ames and Ames, 1984a, 1984b). This is very motivating. Second, students have concrete and undeniable proof of their progress. They *will* make progress, and the constant graphic reminder is highly rewarding, particularly for students who have trouble believing they can become good at anything. (Try using a graph, with the y-axis as the rate and the x-axis to mark each repetition. Make the graph cover an entire 8 1/2 x 11 inch sheet of paper held sideways, but make the y-axis increments large so that the graph only goes to about 50 words per minute. When they exceed 50 words per minute, you'll be



faced with amazed students who discover they have done so well that you need to tape new pieces of paper above the old to extent the graph [see Figure 1]. Even the most reluctant students almost explode with pride and a sense of accomplishment at this point.)

**Figure 1**  
*Example of repeated reading chart with additional sheet of paper taped to the original graph*



The typical experience with repeated reading graphing is that students' rate will increase rather rapidly when repeatedly reading the same passage. A reasonable goal is 100 words per minute. Though some students like to go even faster, the teacher should switch the student to a new book or story when the rate reaches 90-100 words per minute. The rate on the new text will be quite a bit slower, but probably not as slow as the initial reading of the first text. Normally, the curve for the rate increase will be steeper (rate will increase faster) for each subsequent text read and the initial drop-off will decrease. When this pattern is established and students find it relatively easy to become fast with a new text, repeated reading graphing should be stopped.

One obvious problem with repeated reading is that the students quite logically focus on rate rather than on sounding good, since that is what is being measured and displayed. For that reason, repeated reading is useful primarily for choppy and slow readers and the rate calculation and graphing should be discontinued as soon as it has served its purpose. When students are confident and have developed a feeling of success, the emphasis should be explicitly changed from reading fast to sounding good, entertaining, and communicating meaning and feeling.

There are a number of techniques for encouraging and structuring fluency practice which are less structured than repeated reading graphics, such as Reader's Theatre, echo reading, choral reading, and paired reading (Allington, 1983; Anderson, 1981; Burns, 1989; Dowhower, 1987, 1989; Henk, et al., 1986; Koskinen and Blum, 1986; Moyer, 1982; Rasinski, 1989; Schreiber, 1980). These methods should be used simultaneously with repeated readings and can continue to be used well after the rate graphing has been phased out. Though they don't directly emphasize the type of insights into reading

that are the focus of this article, they are crucial for promoting practice in interesting, non-threatening, and meaningful ways. In addition, whenever fluency and performance reading is a topic of behavior and discussion, opportunities for mini-lessons, direct instruction, and other techniques abound. There are three fluency techniques which give students insight into the reading process, improve their metacognitive awareness, expand their expectations and understanding, and increase their power and confidence in reading situations. These are not techniques for practicing fluency, like repeated reading and Reader's Theatre, as much as they are ways to explain how fluency works and to directly teach students what is necessary for them to become fluent; in other words, they teach students about reading.

The first, and simplest of the three, I call "smooshing" the words together. In oral speech there are no vocal breaks between words. We perceive words as units because we know the words already. To demonstrate this play a tape of a foreign language. In a language where we don't know the words, we hear no breaks and it sounds as though the speaker is speaking very fast, as if there aren't any individual words at all. Demonstrate this to the students and then read part of a story both fluently and with pauses between the words. The difference is obvious. Once demonstrated, constantly encourage the students to smoosh the words together while they read, leaving pauses only where there is punctuation. (I call this *The Nagging Technique*: its components are explanation; demonstration; and encouraging, friendly, and humorous nagging.) The improvement in students' fluency is immediate. Many poor readers mistakenly believe that they are supposed to read each word separately, consequently they always sound like they are reading a list of words rather than connected text. The smooshing explanation and practice tends to change this believe and the related behavior.

The second technique is to explain the return sweep eye movement to students. The return sweep is the long eye movement from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. It is difficult for beginning and poor readers because of its length and because it has a downward vertical component. (Some students may temporarily need a finger along with the left margin as a marker to help them place the return sweep. Commonly, students are encouraged to use a card or marker held under the line being read to help focus their attention and avoid skipping or repeating lines. This is a counter-productive technique and it should never be used, since it covers up the line to be read and makes the return sweep abnormal. If a card is used, it should be only temporary and it should always be placed above the line being read.) To demonstrate eye movements to students distribute a photocopy of a page of easy text to one member of each partner team. Have the students poke a pencil-sized hole through the center of the paper, hold the back of the paper and the hole up to their eye and about 12 inches from their partner, and watch their partner's eyes through the hole for a short period of silent reading. They will see the jerky eye movements and pauses for fixations and the return sweep at the end of each line. Explaining and demonstrating this to students helps them understand more about the reading act. Making an accurate and rapid return sweep is necessary to maintain fluency and meaning between the last word on a line and the first word on the next. Simply having some understanding of what occurs during reading that affects their fluency, particularly between lines, tends to give students more control and confidence over their reading. They understand that there is a logical reason for between-line pauses and that they are not used by some personal deficiency. The next method helps them eliminate this pause.

The third technique is to teach students about the eye-voice span. The eye-voice span (EVS) is the distance between the eyes and the voice during oral reading (Levin, 1979). As you have probably noticed in your own oral reading, your eyes are one to three words ahead of your voice, particularly in the beginning and middle of a sentence. This distance allows the reader's mind to use meaning clues to help with word recognition, to use expression to compliment meaning, and to use punctuation to guide intonation. It is impossible to be fluent without an eye-voice span. After explaining the EVS to the students, who are likely to be quite skeptical, you must demonstrate it, preferably a number of times over several days. The demonstration is easy. Use a page of a story on an overhead projector. Have a volunteer student (use a different one each time) come up to the overhead and while you are reading aloud to the class cover the transparency with a piece of paper or turn the power off so that the screen goes dark. You will be able to "read" several words after the story is gone. The students will be amazed, which will precipitate a repeat of the EVS explanation and more demonstrations. As with eye movements, poor and beginning readers will not be sufficiently automatic to use an EVS unless they are repeatedly reading the same text. This repeated reading allows them to become automatic with a particular story and to begin to use an EVS to increase their fluency and to improve their expression and attention to punctuation.

### **Functionality: Getting students to practice**

With the above demonstrations and explanations fluency will become more meaningful and functional for students because they will begin to understand its purposes and how they can achieve it. The problem remains, however, of how to keep the students interested and involved in the extensive practice necessary for achieving their goals. This is one of the areas where the once common practice of round

robin oral reading is particularly weak. Because such reading involves so little actual practice and is inherently competitive, students correctly infer that the purpose of round robin reading is to attend to the position in the text where they are likely to be asked to read, to get the words right, and to avoid embarrassing themselves (Bondy, 1990). Round robin reading also destroys the sense of real purposes for reading and performing for real audiences. Oral reading practice should instead be seen by the students as a way to improve their own skills and to reach individual and personal goals. The individual charts used in repeated readings, the sense of an inner model, and performing for real audiences make these goals concrete and obvious.

In addition to the meaningfulness and functionality which are inherent in the instructional practices described above, there are a number of oral reading activities which are highly motivating because they are purposeful, productive, and rewarding. One of the most effective is to have students practice reading a favorite story or book in order to share their enthusiasm for the text with another student or class. Oral reading is essentially a performance. One reads out loud to share with and to entertain others. When students are given the opportunity (but not pressured) to perform a story of their own choice for other students and when they know that they can be successful with practice and help, they will invariably practice many times. They will also perform in trial situations for the teacher and for other students in the class who are working toward similar goals. Many teachers already have their students reading to younger or older students and know how effective this is. It is very rewarding for the teacher to see poor and otherwise reluctant readers practicing their reading in order to be entertaining for their audience.

The concept of performance reading also applies to plays, Reader's Theatre, and poetry. Classroom plays always seem to be motivating for students, and it is obvious to them that being fluent and sounding good are important. With both plays and poetry it is helpful to start performance reading chorally. Most school plays have fewer characters than there are students in the class. Several students can be assigned to each character with the understanding that they are to practice together. When students read the same material together much of the pressure is relieved. If a student has difficulty with a word or stumbles, the others will carry the moment. Students can be assigned to characters according to their own preferences or according to their vocal characteristics. In the latter case, the teacher functions somewhat like a choir director.

The use of tape recorders can also add to the meaningfulness and functionality. Once the students have been exposed to books on tape, they often become quite excited about the prospect of making their own taped books for themselves, their classmates, or for students in other classes. They begin to develop their own voices and to expand their performances. This can become a real production, with background music and sound effects supplied by cohorts in the class. These tapes should be copied so that they are available for others to listen to in the class or to check out for home listening. Making such tapes for other classes, particularly for younger students, is extremely motivating and provides a significant boost to poor readers' self-esteem. Recorded readings are also often advocated for inclusion in student portfolios. If the students have assumed some ownership over their portfolios, this will provide additional meaningfulness and functionality to motivate practice.

### **A final word**

Instruction like that described above which helps students understand the nature of reading, what good readers do,

and how they can become successful has one over-riding advantage over less explicit instruction. It empowers the students. When learners understand their goals and how to achieve them, and when they can talk and think about something like fluency using appropriate language, then the learners have control. This power and control greatly improves motivation and helps the students keep a fair sense of their own progress. Without ownership, control, and power, student learning is often haphazard and their involvement in learning is often lost. Students who have not been successful in school do not feel that they can succeed, they don't understand how to succeed, they are not involved in learning, and they feel that they have no control or power in school learning situations (Covington, 1992).

Many of these problems can be avoided if the students understand what and how they are to learn, if they are let in on the processes and language of learning, and if they are allowed to practice in ways which they find rewarding and purposeful. Teach your students about reading and teach them the language which goes with this knowledge. Very young students and older disabled students are quite capable of learning, understanding, and using terms such as *automaticity*, *eye-voice span*, and *fluency*. If you help them with this, you and they will all become more successful and more powerful.

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