Reading Fluency and the Novice Reader

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Recent research into the reading process has identified factors other than efficiency in word recognition which account for reading fluency. The automatization of decoding skills exhibited by better readers has been attributed to, among other things, opportunities. Olshavsky (1977), for example, found that poor readers used the same range of strategies as good readers, but had less opportunity to practice and develop them.

Successful beginning readers receive more opportunities to read and comprehend fairly easy reading material. The competent reader decodes with accuracy, but with fluency as well. Poor readers are slow readers; they generally try to read material which is far too difficult for them. What can be done to assist the poor reader? According to Chall (1983) the beginning reader or "Stage 2" reader, usually around seven or eight years of age, should be given plenty of practice so that attention is focused on content rather than decoding. Huey (1968) also said many years ago that "Repetition progressively frees the mind from attention to details, makes facile the total act, shortens the time, and reduces the extent to which consciousness must concern itself with the process" (p. 108).

Good readers also receive more encouragement to "read with expression" and to make meaning of what they have read. The slow readers are not assisted in the same way

(Allington, 1980). For one thing, they are not given as much time to think about what they have read before the teacher or another student helps them. Poor readers are also given fewer opportunities to engage in sustained reading of connected text. Because their reading opportunities are so limited, the meaning of print and the purpose for reading remain a mystery to the slow reader.

Focused comprehension instruction is generally lacking for poor as well as good students, in the beginning stages of reading instruction; actual reading, whether silent or oral, occurs in a piecemeal fashion, with very little sustained contextual reading taking place (Gambrell, 1986).

There is empirical evidence that reading fluency is trainable and training improves overall reading comprehension (Allington, 1983). However, it has been a neglected skill, an indicator being the lack of fluency activities and strategies in reading skills hierarchies or teachers' guides. Another reason fluency skills may not have been stressed until more recently (Allington, 1983; Miccinati, 1985) is that research has been inconclusive on the value of oral reading, which is used in many fluency training activities. Dahl (1979) found that a repeated reading strategy advocated by Samuels (1979) increased decoding speed and accuracy, but Juel and Holmes (1981) found that oral reading increased poor readers' overall processing time.

Although the purposes for oral and also silent reading activities need to be further examined, particularly in light of the needs of novice readers, reading fluency training is being implemented with a number of positive results. Some teachers are successfully using fluency strategies as alternatives to round robin reading.

Paired reading

In this strategy, students are paired in such a way that one is a slightly better reader than the other. During the oral reading phase of the directed reading activity, students take turns reading and asking each other questions. Three purposes are met here. Students are reading more during oral reading, the better reader is encouraging the slower reader to read at a faster pace, and comprehension is stressed as each student asks questions of the other.

Echo reading

Another method which can offer students more reading practice is echo reading. As another alternative to the round robin approach, all the students in a reading group echo or repeat a reading passage read by the teacher. For example, the teacher reads a sentence or two from the students' basal; the students model the teacher's reading. Intonation and expression will be modeled for the students through this method.

Mumble reading

Sometimes referred to as murmur reading, and sometimes as the impress method, this strategy requires the students and teacher to read in unison. This approach offers the students more reading practice, a less threatening environ-ment for reading, and a fluency model — the teacher.

Chanting lists or stories

The use of read-alongs in which the whole class reads to-gether encourages vocabulary growth and fluency. Word lists can be generated very easily by selecting a topic of general interest such as "Scary Words" or "Winter Words" and brainstorming with the students. At any given time three or four lists are in place around the classroom. These lists

may also be placed by the front door of the classroom, so that students are encouraged to read them to their neighbor as they wait in line to leave the classroom. At times throughout the day students choose a list they would like to chant, with the teacher setting the reading pace. Language experience stories (LEA) are used in the same way as the chanting word lists. The stories can be generated by groups of students as a supplemental activity to a basal story. After they have been used repeatedly, the word lists and the LEA stories may be given to students as rewards. Teachers have commented that children value these lists and stories very much.

Repeated readings and choral readings

Performance situations which require individual students to read aloud should come only after repeated readings to enable students to gain the fluency needed (Rasinski, 1988). Samuels (1979) has developed a repeated reading program in which students attempt a first reading, work on problems, and then read again until the result is "smooth." During the "work on problems" stage, students are focusing on specific skills they need to improve rather than on teacher-chosen skills of a more general nature, which might not relate to their immediate needs. Repeated readings for a meaningful purpose build confidence and give novice readers needed practice.

Choral readings may be created from poetry, songs, or stories. Miccinati (1985) has developed different types of choral readings that stress not only fluency skills, but speaking techniques as well, e.g. pitch, stress, and tone.

Memorization tasks

One of the major problems of poor readers is the difficulty they experience in attending to text. Activities to expand their

attention to the task at hand should be planned on a regular basis. Memorization activities that involve students in memorizing simple nursery rhymes or short poetry provide opportunities for repeated readings and the development of longer attention spans.

Phrase boundary marking

Marking phrases lightly with a pencil in the students' text and asking the students to read as quickly as possible to the pencil mark have shown beneficial results by increasing some students' fluency. This technique works particularly well with the slower reader whom the teacher feels could read at a faster pace.

Reading and learning to read are difficult tasks for beginning readers. Meaningful fluency activities that can be easily incorporated into the regular curriculum foster comprehension skills which are often lacking in the beginning reading program.

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