

1-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Leidholdt, L. M. (1989). They Can All Sound Good. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 29 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol29/iss2/5

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THEY CAN ALL SOUND GOOD

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At one time or another every elementary classroom teacher hears a child's oral reading performance which makes him/her feel uncomfortable. Hesitations, repetitions, improper use of intonation skills and word mispronunciations abound. Inconsistent rate and rhythm make comprehension of the text nearly impossible for the listener.

One typically associates this type of reading with children who have below grade level reading achievement. However, this need not be the case. In rooms where teachers understand the variables of fluent texting behavior and use techniques which incorporate the principles of effective practice and learning, listeners will not be able to distinguish between the oral reading performances of the highest and lowest achievers. Differences in their performances will be minimized or eliminated. All can sound good!

Fluent Texting Behavior

Fluent texting behavior is an observable, measurable reading performance which sounds like fluent speaking. Sherman (1979), in his Model of Reading and Learning, describes it as the overlay of language skills to the reading task. To fluently text printed material, readers apply their inherent knowledge of the sound, syntactic, and semantic cue systems of speech to the graphic code of language.

The English language uses a range of sounds that are represented in print by letters or combinations of letters. Fluent texters learn this sound/spelling system and apply it during reading when encountering unfamiliar words. They also apply their knowledge of the prosodic features of language; pitch, stress, and juncture.

In addition, fluent texters use their syntactic knowledge. Syntactic clues include phrase markers (e.g., prepositions)

and punctuation. Syntactic phrase boundaries marked by function words signal to the reader that a unit or cluster of words is ahead. Fluent texters, making use of these signals, adjust their use of the prosodic features of language and pronounce the phrase as a cohesive syntactic unit. In addition to using this internal knowledge of spoken language, fluent texters attend to punctuation marks, the external or graphic signalers of major syntactic boundaries, in a similar fashion. Once again, fluent texters use these marks to adjust their use of the prosodic features of language, and thereby maintain the rhythm and flow of the sentence patterns.

Not only do fluent texters use the sound/spelling system and the syntactic systems of language, but they also use information from the semantic or meaning system. This system includes knowledge of word meanings and concepts acquired throughout life. In order to gain an author's intended message as well as convey it to listeners, fluent texters call forth all the information they have about the text topic and apply it during the reading.

In essence, then, to fluently text printed materials, readers apply all their knowledge of spoken language in conjunction with their knowledge of the graphic code of language. They then produce a reading which sounds like fluent speaking and demonstrate fluent texting behavior.

Determining Fluent Texting Proficiency

Teachers can easily determine children's fluent texting proficiency by examining their oral reading rate. Rate is an observable, measurable sign of the adequacy of the foundation skills which must be integrated for oral reading fluency to occur. Rate, when viewed as an indicator of the proficiency of fluent texting behavior, is not just a measure of how quickly one reads. Karlsen (1969) explains that "Reading rate becomes a significant bit of information if viewed not just as a measure of speed but as a measure of decoding efficiency." (p. 178) In other words, Karlsen feels that rate is an indicator of readers' efficiency in processing and pronouncing words, and therefore is a valuable source of information about readers' word recognition ability.

Gough (1972) proposed that in addition to being related to decoding efficiency, rate is also related to comprehension. "If it takes too long to read a given word, the content of the immediately preceding words will have been lost from the primary memory, and comprehension will be prevented." (p. 532)

Findings from a study done by the author (1983) support both Karlsen's and Gough's points of view. In a comparison of reading performance of fourth graders who were either proficient, average, or deficient in reading comprehension, rate was used as a variable of fluent texting behavior, a reading performance assumed to be related to word recognition skill and reading comprehension. Significant differences ($p=.05$) in rate were found between the three reader groups with the proficient readers averaging more words-per-minute than each of the other groups. In a bivariate correlational analysis of the data, rate was found to be significantly related to word recognition skill both at sight ($r=.82, < .05$) and also decoded ($r.64 < .05$). Rate then, because of its relationship with word recognition skill, was found to be a measure of decoding efficiency as Karlsen (1969) proposed. In addition, rate was found to be significantly related to reading comprehension ($r=.71, < .05$), supporting Gough's (1972) contention that comprehension and rate are related.

The high, positive correlation of rate, word recognition and comprehension implies that an increase in proficiency in one of the skills will be related to a corresponding increase in the others. Therefore, the classroom learning environment should be structured for this end.

Methods to Develop Fluent Texting Behavior

There are several techniques that will improve oral fluent texting behavior while improving rate, word recognition and/or comprehension. One method is imitative reading, where students listen to a tape recorded story several times while following along in the text. Students eventually read the story on their own, imitating the performer's intonation as closely as possible. This technique, however, uses an entire text and requires large blocks of time.

Choral reading is another excellent technique. In this method, students interpret a poem or story in groups of

two or more, improving their speaking skill while at the same time improving their fluent texting behavior. However, choral reading is a group activity which makes monitoring and measuring individual progress difficult.

There is a third technique which improves rate, word recognition, and comprehension skill while boosting reader self-confidence and motivation to read. Unlike the previous two it is designed for individual use and requires only small amounts of time.

This third technique is the "method of repeated readings" (Samuels, 1979). It was first used with remedial readers, who after a few days of using it, demonstrated a significant increase in both reading rate and word recognition accuracy. Additionally, both of these improved skills transferred to other reading passages. Herman (1985) completed a study in which she used the method of repeated readings with less able, nonfluent intermediate grade students. She, like Samuels, found that the readers not only improved their rate of reading and word recognition accuracy, but improved their text comprehension. She also found that the improved rate and word pronunciation accuracy transferred between passages read. However, her readers did not demonstrate a significant improvement in phrasing ability. (The reason for this is discussed later.)

The method of repeated readings can be easily implemented in the classroom. The procedure is as follows:

1. The student reads a short selection (at his/her instructional reading level) to an aide who records the reading rate and number of word recognition errors on a graph.
 2. The student then rereads and practices this selection several times by him or herself.
 3. The selection is then reread to the same person who once again records the rate and number of word recognition errors on the same graph.
 4. The student and aide compare the rate and number of word recognition errors for the two readings. If the child's rate has reached his normal rate of speaking, a new passage is selected and the procedure is repeated. Guszak (1985) provides another rate guide for teacher use. He suggests a minimum oral rate of 60 words per minute for
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first graders, 70 for second graders, 80 for third graders, and 90+ for those in fourth grade or above.

As can be seen, the method requires little special training to implement. In addition it is efficient and cost effective. Teachers will have to initially train aides in the use of the procedure, but once the training is accomplished their involvement need only be for guidance in passage selection.

Further Benefits

Not only does the method of repeated readings improve fluent texting behavior and enhance learning through improved reader self-confidence and motivation, but it easily modifies to accommodate several components of effective practice. Hunter (1984) suggests that initial practice be guided and accompanied by feedback. The method of repeated readings provides for this because an aide monitors student performance, correcting word mispronunciations while recording rate and number of word recognition errors graphically. Hunter also proposes that a short, meaningful amount of material be practiced at one time. This, too, is accomplished because the passages are short. However, to even further assure full meaning, teachers should allow the readers to select materials in their areas of interest.

Furthermore, for effective learning, Hunter suggests that teachers provide models of the behavior they seek. This modeling step, which highlights the critical components of a skill, was absent in Samuels' original description, and in Herman's (1985) study. Their readers, therefore, had no model of fluent texting behavior to emulate. Perhaps this is the reason why Herman's subjects did not improve in their phrasing ability. Teachers, then, must build this in, prior to Step #1 in Samuels' procedure where they model the correct use of the prosodic features of language.

By using the method of repeated readings as a strategy to improve readers' fluent texting behavior, rate, word recognition accuracy, and comprehension can all be improved. In addition, the learnings will transfer and students' motivation to read will improve. Students at the lower achievement levels in reading no longer have to read in a nonfluent manner, signaling their deficiencies to others. Teachers who understand the variables of fluent texting behavior and

who use methods which incorporate the principles of effective learning and practice, can have an entire class of fluent texters. Therefore, when one listens to children read orally in such a classroom, s/he will not be able to distinguish the high achievement level readers from the low. They will all sound good!

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