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DEVELOPING FLUENCY IN THE DISABLED READER

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As a reading teacher, do you know of a third grader or older student exhibiting the following reading difficulties?

- (1) The student is unsure of high frequency words such as the Dolch words.
- (2) The student is a word-by-word reader.
- (3) The student reads connected discourse in a disjointed manner--ignoring punctuation, making abnormal pausal units, etc.
- (4) The student frequently repeats words and phrases.

In general, this type of student has difficulties comprehending text, and lacks the desire and motivation to pursue reading. These reading difficulties describe students who have trouble with fluency. If you are teaching students with fluency problems, the suggested strategies that follow can aid you in helping students overcome these problematic behaviors.

Why do these behaviors occur?

A student's inability to read fluently may be due to a number of reasons. Four possible explanations can be given; however, in most cases, there is usually a combination of reasons for lack of fluency in reading. One explanation may lie with the student's inability to respond immediately to words in print. The student is still unsure of word recognition and has to think about "what the word says" before s/he can attend solely to comprehension or fluent reading. Samuels (1976) states the brain can attend to only one thing at a time. The student whose reading behavior shows signs of poor phrasing, long hesitations, repetitions, and poor comprehension is probably attending to word recognition rather than fluency and comprehension. In order to become fluent, this student has to automatize his/her recognition of words. Samuels argues that the student has to be brought beyond an accurate reading of text, in which the student is still attending to word recognition, to an automatic or no thinking response to words in print.

A second cause for fluency difficulties can be attributed to the student's poor understanding of the natural rhythm of language. The student's inability to perceive language-rhythm may have resulted from a lack of good oral reading "models". Has the student been overly exposed to poor readers' reading aloud? Listening to poor oral reading often occurs in low ability grouped

classrooms where "Round-Robin" reading is frequently employed. During the "Round-Robin" fashion of oral reading, the poor readers are continually exposed to a slow halting type of reading that definitely lacks the natural rhythmic style of fluent reading. As a result, these poor oral readers probably never hear a good "model", and their poor oral reading habits are reinforced continually by the other peer models.

A third reason for nonfluent reading may be attributed to lack of practice. The first question to ask is how much time does the student devote to independent reading each day? If the answer is little or none, then your job as a teacher is to try to change the student's behavior. The only cure for poor reading is to read fluently. Smith (1979) states this same edict, "To learn to read children need to read. The issue is as simple and difficult as that" (p. 5). Both silent and oral reading need to be practiced.

A fourth reason for a student's inability to read fluently may be precipitated by continual reading of materials which are far too difficult for him or her. The student who is reading at frustration level is likely never to develop a natural flowing style to his or her reading. The difficulty of the material causes the student to continue poor reading habits; that is, reading slowly in a very disjointed fashion.

Developing Fluency

How can the teacher help the non-fluent reader? There are some specific strategies and suggestions enabling the teacher to develop a student's fluency. Most of the strategies and suggestions require some individual attention while other can be implemented with a group of students.

Three Minute Repeated Timings

The name of the first fluency strategy provides a clue to implementation. The student is given three minutes to read orally as much of the passage as possible. While the student reads a passage, the teacher notes all the student's miscues. A record of the student's miscues provides the teacher with clues for needed instruction such as gross mispronunciations in which the student produces a non-word and never self-corrects. Other instructional clues can be numerous repetitions as well as substitutions, omissions, and insertions which change the meaning of text. As soon as the student finishes the first oral reading, the teacher can quickly scan the major miscues made and provide instruction so a more fluent re-reading of the passage can occur. Instruction may include the teacher "modeling" portions of the passage which present difficulties to the student, or the teacher may refer the student to the passage, developing meaning of an unknown word. The instruction between the first and second readings should give the student a better understanding of the passage so that s/he can read it more fluently during the second reading. Instruction that develops textual meaning provides additional cues to the reader so fluent reading easily occurs. All instruction is short in duration and is followed by a re-reading.

During the second reading, the teacher again notes all miscues. Miscues for the second reading are noted on the same record sheet

as used for the first reading, but the miscues are noted with a different color pencil so that they can be easily differentiated from the notes of the first reading. This miscue procedure offers the teacher a quick comparison of the two oral readings. Improvement as well as lack of it is easily seen, and the teacher can detect whether the intervening instruction produces any positive changes in oral reading behavior. If the student's fluency improves, s/he also increases the number of words read during the three minute interval, and the student can immediately see improvement. The "instant" feedback creates student motivation, which in turn helps to continue the progress. Improvement is also seen easily by the student when the first and second readings are taped and played back. Taping is an opportunity to analyze the changes in reading performance in fine detail. Both forms of feedback are beneficial for student improvement.

A short period of instruction can again take place after the second reading, followed by a third trial, the use of which depends on progress shown in the second reading. In most cases, the student makes the greatest improvement between the first and second trial. The student improves on the third trial, but the improvement is not as dramatic. More than three trials does not seem to be beneficial.

Repeated Readings

The repeated reading strategy (Samuels, 1979) is similar to the three minute repeated timings, but specific differences do exist. Repeated readings require the student to read orally a very short passage (50-200 words) in which the student's goal is to reach the criterion of 85 words per minute. The student repeats the passage until s/he reaches this criterion. Significant miscues are noted along with rate, and both are charted to show the student's achievement and progress. After each reading, the student is to answer a question based on the reading, so that comprehension is seen as an integral part of smooth, continuous reading. Samuels reports that as the student repeatedly reads the same passage and increases his/her rate, the number of miscues also decreases. As the teacher continues this strategy over a period of time, students require fewer re-readings in order to reach the criterion of 85 wpm. In addition, he says, initial rates on new passages are faster for each successive passage that is used for instruction (Samuels, 1979).

Between each repeated reading, the student can practice the passage alone, with another student, or with a tape recorder. There is a disadvantage to practicing a passage alone, since no feedback can be given. Practicing with another student can be helpful in this and other ways. If classmates have discussed and agreed on the concept of constructive criticism, feedback from a peer may be valuable. Tape recording also can be beneficial for fluency instruction. If a tape is first made of the passage, it can be used as a "model" for appropriate reading. The student can either listen to the passage and follow along or read along with the tape. Additionally, the tape recorder can be used to record the student's progress, by comparing successive readings.

Repeated readings furnish the student ample opportunity to master material before s/he is required to begin a new passage (Samuels, 1979). Passage mastery gives the student a feeling of success about reading, and motivate him/her to seek further improvement in reading.

Taped Reading

In the third technique, the student needs a book and the tape-recorded version of the book to develop fluent reading. Chomsky (178) has reported that disabled readers improve their reading skills by practicing with a taped version of a trade book. To begin the procedure, the teacher needs to record a number of books of varying difficulty on tape. The voices on the tapes should be lively and reflect a good oral interpretation of the story. The student should make his/her own selection even if the book seems to be beyond the student's instructional level. The tape can provide the necessary "crutch" to bridge the instructional gap. If the book selection is too easy, then the student will proceed easily to the next tape. The student's selection of an easy book may provide the necessary ingredient of success so improvement in reading can develop.

The student is to listen to the taped book in its entirety every day and follow along in text. After each day's listening, the student can then return to any part of the tape for practice. Either the student can read along with the tape or listen to the tape and record his/her own voice. The teacher spends two 30 minute periods per week with the student on the taped book.

Instruction may begin with the student's identification of the part of the book s/he has prepared for the teacher. The student reads orally the prepared section of the book followed by teacher instruction on the same section. Instruction may include identifying isolated words by using a window-frame device in which the teacher places the card with the opening over the word and asks the student to identify the word. If the student is unable to recognize the word, the teacher lifts the card, and the student is able to use the context to identify the unknown word. Questions, leading to assessment of comprehension, are also part of this session.

Chomsky regarded the tape as a support and a model for developing fluency. Chomsky saw students' attitudes toward reading change to a more positive one, through use of tapes. With each new book, it took the students less time to become fluent in their oral reading. The students were reading more regularly than before the taped reading was initiated; this was true both at home and at school. Chomsky attributed the students' improvements to being immersed in the same books until fluent reading was developed, and being given repeated opportunity to actively participate during teacher or self-instructional time.

Model Reading

The fourth strategy, model reading, can be likened to the strategy (assisted reading) developed by Hoskisson (1979) for

beginning readers. In this strategy, the teacher "models" the sentence, paragraph, or page prior to the student's reading, then the student attempts to model the teacher's reading by "echoing" the previously read material. The student needs feedback to recognize the degree of progress. Praising the child or taping the child's "echoed" response may be helpful. This strategy furnishes the student with small chunks of material to assimilate, but within a meaningful framework of connected discourse.

Other Approaches Revisited

The following three approaches for developing fluency are not new and can easily be accomplished in a large group situation. Reading aloud daily to children of all ages has been stressed by many reading authorities (Smith & Johnson, 1980). While reading aloud the teacher is "modeling" smooth, fluent reading. The student is given an opportunity each day to assimilate appropriate phrasing, pitch, stress, and juncture, and to use the teacher's reading as a goal for him/her to reach.

Choral reading is also useful, though not new, for developing fluency. Students learn through group oral reading how to read smoothly in phrases with good stress, pitch, and juncture. The group is the "model" of good fluent reading. Poetry can serve as a good stimulus for choral reading. The practice required to read well in a choral format also provides the poor reader with the needed ingredient of repetition to become fluent.

Reading easier material is another strategy for developing fluency. The student is encouraged to select books at his/her independent reading level and read many of these simpler books. As the student is immersed in the meaning and movement of the easier books, fluent reading gradually develops. Reading easy materials, the student can easily attend to appropriate phrasing within a meaningful context. The beauty of the last three suggested approaches is their manageability within a classroom.

With the more severe nonfluent reader, all of the suggested approaches may be needed to develop fluency. Each approach can be beneficial to the reader who is having difficulties with reading smoothly. Developing fluency enables the poor reader to attend to meaning, and what is reading if it is not comprehension?

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