

7-1-1978

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Recommended Citation

Ross, P. A. (1978). Developing Fluency in Word-by-Word Readers. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 18 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol18/iss4/10

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DEVELOPING FLUENCY IN WORD-BY-WORD READERS

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What can be done to nudge word-by-word readers from their halting habits into the fluency which characterizes good reading? Not only is the slow reader discouraged by the tedium of his word reading, he is unlikely to get much meaning from the print because the short-term memory becomes overloaded and he cannot process ideas efficiently.⁵

A look at what good readers do will provide clues as to how reading teachers may approach the problem. Skilled readers do not identify letters en route to words because word identification is too fast for letter-by-letter analysis. Fast readers scan for meaning; they do not read all of the words, but rather sample meaning information from most words. At least one study suggests that good readers do not pay much attention to vowels, pulling meaning instead from the consonants as primary visual cues.²

Pedantic readers need to shift their focus from the individual word to connected discourse and to integrate their fragmented responses. Slow readers, having been drilled in phonics year after year, have become too bogged down in letters and words. It is little wonder that they need help in seeing the larger picture—the sweeping line, the flowing idea—and in learning to attend to the semantics and syntax instead of plodding along word-by-word.

Carol Chomsky increased the fluency of slow readers by having them listen to tape-recorded books until they could read along with the book. For some children, this meant playing the tape as many as twenty times! And although this may appear to have been an artificially induced fluency, it nonetheless jolted these readers out of their ruts and into the desired behavior. One extra benefit of this experiment was that these readers discovered to their joy that they, too, were capable of reading along like everyone else. The self-confidence they gained from the experience broke them free from their previous conceptions of themselves as failures and generated new and successful attempts at reading.¹

Another method of turning hapless readers into happy readers is by using poetry in the classroom. Even children who think they do not like reading will find reading poetry irresistible when their active participation is rewarding. Children who seldom volunteer to read will do so when increased fluency enables them to do so comfortably.

Poems with regular rhythms seem to capture children the most. To use any poem with slow readers, I read the poem first as the children followed along on their papers. Having the teacher read the selection first is a critical step as it provided the first acquaintance with words which might be unknown and with the intonation that carries the meaning.

The second time we read it together slowly. Then we divided ourselves into two groups, with each group saying a line or response. By this time even the slowest readers were joining in as the poem became familiar. The observant teacher will ensure that for the first few readings, children's eyes are on their books or papers; children must experience the eye sweep as words on paper and words from the mouth become one.

Hands went up as different students asked to read the poem alone; several did so, with obvious delight. By the time it was apparent that some children were able to say the poem from memory, instead of by reading it, we moved on to another poem. Eyes had read it, mouths had read it, minds had read it. And most importantly of all, slow readers had read it as well as anybody else, which is, after all, their great goal whether articulated or not!

The same repetitious procedure can be used with any short stories or poems. Perhaps everyone's favorite books are Bill Martin, Jr.'s *Sound of Language* series. There is no limit to the ways of developing fluency through oral reading. A few are:

1. Teacher begins a story, setting the mood. Students who wish to read orally raise hands and read until they wish to stop or must be stopped.
2. Teacher reads the story, leaving out certain key words either within sentences or at the ends of sentences. This speeds up the eye movements of slow readers, forcing them ahead. Children consider this a game and relish the challenge of being able to supply the missing words.
3. Students choose partners, sit in various corners or crannies in the classroom to read to each other. They beg to read the "Bill and Noodles" dialogue from the *Sounds of Language* series.⁴
4. Teacher reads the entire story the first time, explaining any new or difficult words. Students read round robin the second time.
5. Teacher reads the story. Students read with her as they are inclined. It works well for the teacher to begin at a slower pace, increasing gradually to a normal speaking rate.
6. Sometimes a student will ask to read the entire selection, especially if it reflects a particular interest. In this case the student reads it to himself first before reading to the class.
7. Choral reading can be adapted to many short stories or poems, dividing the class into groups by various ways: by rows, by girls and boys, blue-eyes and brown-eyed, right- and left-handers, tall and short, etc. This device lends a gamelike atmosphere to the activity.

It must be emphasized that there is nothing wrong with repeating selections. In fact, developing fluency in slow readers requires it. Linguist Charles Fries reminds reading teachers that to read effectively, one must develop high speed recognition responses to the graphic signs. While good readers may be able to do this on sight, slower readers require much practice to do so.³

Fluent reading is a highly complex synthesis of all the reading skills the student has acquired—word identification and meaning, sentence meaning as it affects intonation, and speech production. The student must repeat a selection until fragmentation becomes integration.

Margaret Mead reminds us that we don't object to skaters' or pianists' or hockey players' practicing incessantly. Why should we call all practice of basic skills such as reading or writing "dull drill" and throw it out? ⁵ While the vogue for inductive teaching and learning is appropriate in some areas, it cannot supplant repetition and drill in skill areas. Surely children have as much right to gain proficiency in a basic skill such as reading fluency as they do in learning a sport. Reading teachers will keep this in mind as they insist upon oral practice for developing fluency in word-by-word readers.

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