

# Fluency

In recent years there has been a great deal of attention devoted to fluency by educators and reading professionals. However, little attention has been directed to automaticity. I view automatic word recognition as the center of fluent reading. Practice and repetition enhance automaticity. Those who read more encounter many repetitions of common words as well as encounters with new words. Encounters and repetitions support usage- all of which in turn contributes to automaticity.

Reading fluency consists of three related aspects: reading words accurately, reading with prosody, and reading at an appropriate rate for the specific text one is reading. This paper focuses on helping students overcome word-by-word reading and finger tracking of print because both negatively impact fluency. These reading behaviors should be eliminated by the middle of first grade if not sooner. Older students who continue to finger track print when reading need support to eliminate the behaviors which often results in poor comprehension. Finger tracking and word-by-word reading are burning up working memory leaving little working memory for comprehension.

Students beyond first grade who finger track print typically have an ingrained and ineffective reading process which can be challenging to remedy. When working with students who'd have this behavior, the teacher is actually teaching students two behaviors: 1. a new more fluent reading pattern where students read chunks of two or more words; and, 2. Teaching students how to inhibit the less effective behaviors. Inhibiting old habits can sometimes be difficult as well as time consuming work because students may revert quickly to their old ways of reading if left unattended.

I have researched and developed teaching moves for helping students to eliminate finger tracking and word-by-word reading. The essential teaching procedures included the following:

- Invite 3-4 students to the table. Have them bring a self-selected text that they have chosen (using self-selected library books has the added benefit of enabling the teacher to determine if the student is selecting appropriate texts for independent reading). Alternatively, the teacher can provide appropriate texts for the students.
- Inform the students that you have invited them to join you at the table because they have demonstrated a tendency to read word-by-word or continue to track print with their fingers. Explain that these reading behaviors are detrimental because they may interfere with comprehension- explain that they are using up too much brain power by focusing attention at that word level. Doing such limits thinking about how the words work together to create meaning.
- Explain that you will listen to each child read a paragraph or perhaps a bit more text and offer suggestions for how they might improve their reading fluency. (The other students at the table are asked to read silently or working on sight word development when the teacher is with another student).
- As the student reads orally look for other reading behavior miscues such as how a student solves an unfamiliar or difficult word, if the child has difficulty with the return

sweep, if the child continues to read and does not self-correct when making a miscue, or when the text is no longer making sense. These are common miscues to be alert to-there are others. **DO NOT TRY TO REMEDY ALL MISCUES.** Start your work with helping the student gain fluency by inhibiting the word-by-word and/or finger tracking behaviors.

- Model for students how their reading sounded. An approximation is fine, but it is important to **SHOW** the student how they sounded when reading aloud.
- Then, model chunking two or more words together in a fluent manner. For many students it is best to limit the text chunks to two words and increase the word chunks in subsequent sessions as the student demonstrates an improved fluency rate. Some students can begin with longer chunks of texts-trust your professional judgment about suggesting larger text chunks. If the student attempts longer chunks without success ask the reader to continue with two chunks.
- Send the student off to practice fluent reading of the same text. When the student is ready they return to the table to demonstrate improved fluency.
- Assign a paragraph for reading at home to practice the fluent reading behaviors. It is suggested that the student read the text four times-perhaps more. Explain that they are to continue practicing until they can read the text fluently. This includes correct pronunciation of unfamiliar or challenging words.
- Direct students to meet you at the table at the start of class each day to demonstrate more fluent reading of the assigned text.
- Often students revert back to their less efficient reading behaviors when they stumble over an unfamiliar word or for some other reason such as return sweep errors, or attempting to read sentences with tricky or unfamiliar syntax. Explain to the student why they had difficulty reading fluently at that point in their reading. **THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT BECAUSE STUDENTS NEED TO LEARN HOW TO SELF MONITOR TO INHIBIT INGRAINED INEFFICIENT READING BEHAVIORS.** When students stumble have them go back and reread to fix the problem. Model as necessary.
- The amount of time to remedy the word-by-word reading will vary with students. It may take about three weeks-perhaps longer. **THE KEY IS CONSISTENTLY MEETING DAILY WITH THE STUDENTS.** Change will occur if you and the students are diligent. Student engagement and motivation generally increases when they realize that reading is becoming more fluent.
- When students have demonstrated a consistent ability to eliminate the word-by-word reading, release them from the group and add another reader who needs support. Continue to check during independent reading on those students you have released. An effective practice is to pull up next to the reader during independent reading and ask them to read to you. You will quickly know if the student has retained the ability to maintain a more rhythmic reading pattern.

### Fluent and Non-fluent Reading

My main concern for non-fluent reading is its connection with comprehension. Nothing destroys meaning more rapidly than dull monotone reading. Non-fluent reading is characterized by droning through phrases and punctuation marks, pausing at points that break the syntactic grouping of words, and loses the sense of the text.

Fluent readers pick up the visual information in print quickly. Fluency at the letter level is essential, but not sufficient for effective processing. That's because fluent readers recognize whole words quickly and automatically. Fluent readers understand that they are reading language and parse the words into groups/phrases that make sense.

Ultimately, the fluent reader uses comprehension itself to support fluency. For example, a student reading a fictional text understands that it is a narrative text that has a structure and uses the structure to make meaning. The reader knows that in the beginning of the text the character, the setting, and the problem are typically presented. The reading and thinking work at the beginning of the narrative is to determine WHO, WHAT, WHERE, and WHEN, Next, the plot unfolds in a series of events that reveal the character's traits and motives as the character works to solve the problem,. The thinking work required is the middle requires the reader to know that what was learned in the beginning may break and change. The reader needs to be alert for what changes and why. finally a resolution is reached where the character succeeds or not. Readers who understand text structure can better understand how one sentence flows into another in the creation of meaning.

It is important to know how many words per minute(WPM) a student reads. if the reader is more than 20% below the norm, fluency should be a concern. By the end of third grade a student should be reading 110-135 WPM, by the end of fourth grade 135-165 WPM, and by the end of fifth grade 190-210 WPM.

Rate, accuracy, and prosody make-up the components of fluent reading. The actual reading rate of a student is less important than the other components if the student's comprehension is good. The important element regarding rate is the increase over time. Teachers should look for increases of rate as the year progresses.

In terms of accuracy, students should be reading at 90-95% accuracy for independent reading. When readers are processing text below 90% fluency and comprehension are undermined. Prosody is essential for comprehension and should be checked often especially as the student encounters more difficult text. Stress and intonation are the main elements of prosody and should be noted by the teacher.

#### Observable Behaviors of Non-fluent Readers

- Reads in a choppy or word-by-word way
- Uses little or no expression
- Sometimes uses inappropriate expression
- Reads slowly without comprehension
- Sometimes ignores punctuation
- Reads all texts the same way whether the text is a poem, fiction, or nonfiction
- Fails to differentiate dialogue from other forms of text
- Is not often aware of the text's syntax

- Reads in a monotone
- Has limited or inefficient word solving strategies
- Tends to sound out words at the smallest unit-letter-by letter
- Doesn't anticipate meaning
- Pauses randomly