

Fluency

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What is fluency and why is it important?

Fluency is a key contributor toward independent and successful reading and is comprised of three components: accuracy, rate, and prosody (expression). It is these capabilities that support students' comprehension of an author's message (Hudson, 2011; Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010; Rasinski, Padak, & Fawcett, 2010; Reutzel & Cooter, 2012; Walpole, McKenna, & Philippakos, 2011). Fluent readers read more words and because of this they have increased opportunities to further develop their word recognition skills, broaden their vocabulary, increase their knowledge about the world, and strengthen and refine their comprehension abilities. Fluent reading is a particularly important skill for students as they move through the year levels as they increasingly use longer textbooks, read lengthier narratives and research topics in depth and are most often working with set timelines.

Links with comprehension

Fluent reading supports students to read texts for meaning; to understand an author's message, and to be able to engage in meaningful talk about texts (Serravallo, 2010). However, some students can read accurately and 'sound' fluent yet when asked to retell what has been read may not have understood an author's message at all or perhaps only partially. Often described as the link or 'bridge' between oral language, word recognition and comprehension, fluent reading offers students independence and satisfaction (Bashir & Hook, 2009; Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Wilson, 2012).

Factors that influence development of fluency

1. To be able to read with a smooth flowing rate and expression, students should be able to readily name over 90% of the words in the text (Allington, 2012).
2. Secure letter-sound knowledge (alphabet and phonics) supports fluency.
3. If students are unfamiliar with a particular text type it is likely that they may read less fluently while they orient themselves to how the text is formatted and written.

4. Limited background knowledge about a topic makes it harder to get into a text.
5. If students have limited fluency they may become discouraged about their ability. This can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where students avoid reading and don't get the practice they need.
6. Allocated time needs to be set for fluency instruction.
7. Instruction should be systematic and explicit. Demonstrations of fluent reading followed by opportunities for guided practice should be presented before independent practice is undertaken. Consolidation through ongoing review supports the gradual release of responsibility.

Three components of fluency

1 Accuracy

Accuracy is the ability to effortlessly name words or to draw on a mediated process when unfamiliar words cannot be automatically recognised (Evanchan, 2010). A secure knowledge of phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge (alphabet and phonics), sight words, and high-frequency words supports students to become accurate readers (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Constant attention to word recognition may see students tiring and losing motivation to continue reading (Kuhn & Rasinski, 2011). Weber (2006 in Allington, 2009) found that high-frequency words (such as those in the Oxford Wordlist <http://www.oxfordwordlist.com/pages/>) can be quite problematic for students to read given their visual similarity (the/then/they/there, were/went/with/when) so automatic and fluent naming takes away the burden of word recognition. Another reason given by Weber though is that these function words are often not so easily heard in the flow of speech yet they can significantly influence pronunciation e.g. 'Jack is in the forest' may be heard as 'Jack is'n the forest'.

2. Rate

"Reading rate is comprised of the speed and fluidity a reader uses as he/she reads a text" (Evanchan, 2010, p. 12). However, fluency is not just about reading faster because emphasising

speed may give students the impression that it is the ultimate aim of reading- at the expense of comprehension. Allington (2009, p. 17) makes the point that "...glued-to-print, word-by-word reading is an important step in becoming a "real" reader" and that most students appear to move quite readily into phrase reading during the early years of school. A comment serving no useful purpose is when educators tell students they should read faster.

3. Prosody

"Prosody is the ability to read with expression and with reading that sounds like speaking (Evanchan, 2010, p. 12). Prosody is HOW words are read and interpreted and so can have a direct impact on whether students understand what they are reading or have read. Kuhn & Rasinski (2011) suggest that it is adept use of prosody that provides the nuances and interpretations when reading. Aspects of prosody include the following:

Intonation: is when readers vary the pitch (rise and fall) of their voices. Students' correct use of intonation confirms that they understand the expressions and feelings associated with the words.

Punctuation: supports readers to understand the views and information conveyed in sentences. The author indicates when to read naturally, to pause, and to stop so their thoughts are clearly conveyed. Punctuation helps readers to comprehend what authors want them to understand.

Phrasing: where a reader's ability to read a cluster of words together before pausing helps to convey an author's meaning.

Stress: that is placed on syllables directs pronunciation and helps to distinguish parts of speech, for example, permit (noun), permit (verb) and to emphasise meaning, for example, You dropped the glass/You dropped the glass/You dropped the glass/You dropped the glass.

Such is the importance placed on prosody that Dudley & Mather (2005, p. 22) assert that "When readers are able to mirror the inflections of spoken language, they are demonstrating their abilities to comprehend the text, self-monitor, and self-correct their reading errors." Further, even if independent and successful readers are asked to read accurately and at a fast rate they may not be able to read with good prosody because of their attention to the other two

elements: reading needs to be paced at a natural rate so that readers can thoughtfully understand an author's message (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010).

Fluency is often about getting students to read texts again so educators need to have a range of palatable and interesting practice activities.

Instructional approaches

1. Read with a whisper phone

A process that provides immediate feedback is to use pieces of PVC pipe to construct a whisper phone so a student can listen to themselves read (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). Alternatively, have the student twist the pipe into an 's' shape so a partner can listen to them reading. Once the student has finished reading, their partner can pose questions about the text to confirm their comprehension. Students enjoy the instant feedback of hearing their own voice and because they need to only read using a quiet voice there is less chance of interrupting others.



2. Read with a puppet

Ask a student to select and place a puppet on their hand. The puppet then reads the text to a partner using the voice of the character. When the puppet has finished reading, the puppet summarises what has been read and the partner restates what the puppet summarised.



3. Read with a mask

Ask a student to select and wear a mask. The character/animal then reads the text to a partner using the voice of the character/animal. When the character/animal has finished reading, the partner asks (at least) three questions about what was read to check for comprehension.



4. Read to a figurine or stuffed toy

Ask a student to introduce themselves to their selected 'listener' by telling them their name, their interests and why they like them. The student then reads the text to the 'listener' using the voice of the figurine or stuffed toy. When the student has finished reading they state three questions that the 'listener' would likely ask them about the text.



5. Read with a microphone

Have the student practice reading their text a few times then give them a microphone and ask them to read their text to a partner. (Some toy microphones have an option where different voices allow the speaker to sound like e.g. a robot, man, woman, or someone with a high-pitched voice. These can be highly motivating for reluctant readers). When the student has finished reading, their partner takes the microphone and interviews the reader by asking them at least three questions about what was read.



6. Read to a celebrity

Ask a student to select a photo of a well-known personality or character. Have the student introduce themselves to the celebrity by telling them their name, their interests and why they are a fan. The student then reads to the celebrity. When they have finished reading, the student retells what they just read to ensure the celebrity understood the author's message.



7. Take your chance

Write names of family or personalities onto card and put the numbers 1-6 against each name. Have students roll a die and depending on the number rolled, read their text using the voice of the name against the number rolled e.g. mum, dad, brother, sister, teacher, cartoon or media personality.





Holding your nose is an effective way to 'change your voice'!

8. Readers' Theatre

Use scripts as a way of having students read 'in character'. Re-reading supports the development of expression and deeper comprehension.

1. Leader reads the story aloud.
2. Everyone reads the story together.
3. Partners read the story together.
4. Everyone is assigned a part.
5. Students practice their parts on their own.
6. Students practice their parts together.
7. Students share the story with the class" (Ford & Opitz, 2002, p. 715).



9. Narrator and students

Listen to the narrator read the text and then have students use these approaches.

1. Read WITH the narrator.
2. Read JUST BEFORE the narrator.
3. Read JUST AFTER the narrator.

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