

Targeting Reading Fluency for ESL Students
A research based and practical application

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to review methods that produce productive results for ESL readers. These practical strategies have proven to have positive results in classroom settings. Successful strategies and ways to connect with students are emphasized.

Introduction

Fluency in reading refers to the speed and ease with which we read, according to the Government Partnership for Reading Publications. You might ask, “Why fluency should be taught?” According “Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction” (p.3), National Fluency Government Partnership for Reading from 2007 “Students who are not fluent readers will spend more time on decoding than they do on understanding the meaning of the text.” As we know, beginning readers are not fluent. Their reading is choppy, has mispronunciations, and has an overabundance of hesitations. There are three elements of fluent reading: speed, accuracy, reading with proper rhythm, intonation and expression. The development of fluent reading involves learning to look at each word quickly and efficiently. The eye movements of the struggling reader are fixated on a text and move backwards or skip words more often than good readers. Guided oral reading and frequent independent reading are the major instructional techniques used to increase reading fluency, according to this publication.

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A second grade ESL reading class was in small groups of five to six children. One group was with the teacher, the next group was working on a skill for the day at their seats, and the third group was in smaller groups of twos in centers focusing yet on another reading skill. They took approximately 40 minutes in each group. The groups were flexibly grouped. Each group had a name that related to a story element - one called, ‘Main Idea’, another called, ‘Characters’, and the third called, ‘Setting’. Since the children hear the terms all year long, then later in the year when they are doing a play, or when writing begins, the students have already established that a story is composed using all of these elements.

Successful Strategies and Ways to Connect with Students

Strategies learned from 21 years of teaching and practicing, experimenting, being consistent, and discovering ways to connect to the student’s everyday application have proven to be successful. Goals for *each* student by the end of the year are for him/her not only to comprehend what they read but to read fluently over (60+) words a minute *faster* than when he/she first walked into the room.

The goal is for students to understand the vocabulary from the *first day* of reading each new story, not only the correct pronunciation but also the true meaning of it. Two parts of the words are printed on a sentence strip. The first part is the word to be recognized. The second part is the meaning. After much discussion of the word and the syllables, short, long vowel, blends, using it in a sentence, etc. then the students are asked, “Which meaning do you think the word is?” This, according to the research, are

the areas of the reading process where learners' fluency is diagnosed "(letter, syllable, word, phrase, sentence, and/or paragraph reading) leads to increases in reading achievement for beginning readers" (p4) in "Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction", National Fluency Government Partnership for Reading from 2007. After this process, the story begins with each child taking a turn reading the passage one page at a time. The teacher asks relevant, comprehensive questions as each page is read.

The *second day* the students may take turns and ask each other comprehension questions, depending on the passage length. Along with this, the students may be asked questions using a graphic organizer to convey the plot, character analysis, story elements, etc. to enable them to comprehend the story.

The *third day* the story is read again, this time in paired reading using stand-up folder dividers so as not to make it a competition for each pair. During the reading, the partner may help the one who is reading, and the teacher listens to different groups. After they finish reading, the students have small hand-held cards to ask each other many questions. They come from the Reading Academy for second grade. They are questions such as: What did you like most about the story? What new words did you learn? What was the main idea of the story?, etc. After taking up the dividers and small cards there should be much discussion on the summary of the story. They are asked, "If your mom asks you, 'What did you read today in class?' she would get a very good idea of the characters, setting, plot, a little detail, and main idea of the story you just read. When they "talk" it out, the teacher writes it on a small white board, as they tell her what took place.

The teacher gives each child a small hand-held card for them to see, as it is a strategy for telling the summary. It reads [on the card]: someone...wanted...so...but...then... this gives a skeleton to the things needed to connect the important happenings to the story. By the middle of the school year, they are writing full sentences of the summary on their own.

The *fourth day*, the students read the story and listen to an accompanying tape. They listen to the tape the first time around in their small group, and the second time they read one-on-one with the tape reader. If they begin to be behind the pace of the person reading, the tape may be stopped and they are to do it over again as well as follow along with their finger to get their eyes moving faster along the page. In doing this, they get accustomed to the correct fluency week after week along with the correct inflection of the voices. The students might do vowel connection work in their reading journals. This might be blends, sound a likes, prefixes, suffixes, root words, comparisons of sounds etc. As the weeks go by the students have begun to be on their way to better fluency.

The article refers to the K-6 Research: "The NRP review of research related to phonics instruction found that children's reading fluency improves when they are taught decoding using systematic approaches to phonics instruction" (p56) in "Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction", National Fluency Government Partnership for Reading.

By the *fifth day*, they are through with their story, and they will do a holistic approach from the reading to writing. The students might write poems on fall leaves that they have just read in the story book about Henry and Mudge. They write fall poems with their use of descriptive words about the brilliant, colorful fall leaves, using adjectives, nouns, vivid verbs, and prepositional phrases. Perhaps they read about a park, so they will creatively write about the day they went to a park. Since they are learning about the Compass Rose in Social Studies, not only will they draw their very own park using N-S-E-W and a key map showing where everything is but they will write a narrative about all the activities they did using descriptive words in their stories. They have words they can “grab on to” that they have been brainstormed, words they have seen, smelled, heard, (using onomatopoeia words), felt, etc. Their stories have settings, characters, places (which brings in proper nouns), things they did with emphasis on their feelings, etc. The next approach would be in writing narratives using quotes. This way they will have some communication going on using “said” words. It is encouraged for them to use the “said” word only once and choose any other synonyms of the said words (of about 50) that are hanging on a poster board all year long. Going right along with what Suzanne Reid said in her book- *Book Bridges for ESL Students*, “...provide opportunities for students to practice English-push them gently to speak, read, copy, write, ask, respond, answer, compare, contrast and even complain” (p6) *Book Bridges for ESL Students* 2002-2004.

Another important strategy is homework, which is given to them once a week all year long: Take-Home-Readers that go along with the story read during the week. It is not the same story, but the key words are the same. It is copied off for them each Monday, and they are to grid the time it took them to read it on Monday of each week. Along with this, the parent is to sign off each time they read every day. The first time on Monday they have to time it, and then the last time on Thursday they have to time it. Each day the student is to read twenty minutes of selected Take-Home Readers. They can read other books on the side if they so desire such as library books, books they have at home etc. However, the main purpose in this exercise is for them to compete against **themselves**. This has to be emphasized, as it takes the pressure off winning or losing. The teacher then follows up by looking at the grid every Friday and congratulating them for trying or improving. They will have about 36 small Take-Home-Readers for the summer to read, too! They are to keep the readers in a very special place so they can have these books for their very own and read them again and again whenever they want.

In the researched-based principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction the author emphasize fluency: “The repeated reading of passages of text, words from text and other text units” are all used. “Several studies have used repeated reading to improve student fluency. Students read the same text several times until they are able to read it rapidly and accurately” (p7) “Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction”, National Fluency Government Partnership for Reading. The research from K-12 level found that “procedures that have students reading passages orally multiple times while receiving guidance or feedback from peers, parents, or teachers are effective in improving a variety of reading skills”. In the same statement it reads: “Many procedures, such as repeated reading (with and without feedback), paired reading, shared reading, and collaborative or assisted oral reading, seem to be effective.”

This research states: “The NRP review of procedures such as Sustained Silent Reading and others that encourage students to read more (and thus perhaps develop their reading fluency) *does not* find that these approaches are effective in improving students’ reading” (p8) “Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction” National Fluency Government Partnership for Reading.

One more thing that is added throughout the year to the fluency is “Reader’s Theater”. The teacher first reads it to each reading group to get the feel, main idea, energy, voice of different characters, and visualize the play itself. The next day the play is read together, and the third day they choose which character they want to read. Two or three students can be chosen for the same character. The important part of this is to have them get into the play where they don’t feel the least bit intimidated, and they feel comfortable. Later, they read the whole play to themselves, practice peer reading, and eventually they all read as one big group. The play starts to take form. The characters are chosen for the parts, the cues are learned, projection of voice is practiced, the character’s emotions are rehearsed, the setting or scene is set, the make up is created, costumes are prepared if needed, the students memorize the play, and finally it is time for the performance. All in all, it takes a little over two weeks to perfect. Sometimes they will even create a playbill with the summary, character’s names, and a little about the director. The parents are invited as well as grandparents, aunts, and uncles. At times they will invite principals, teachers, and students of different classes to be the audience.

As an extension of the play, for example, Johnny Appleseed, the class can write in letter format to a distant relative of his and ask questions they might still have concerning the character, write what they liked about him or what they learned. They have extended the play by generating the concept of a time line using the main events of Johnny’s life. The elaboration of his life is given in full detail of their readings and brings forth rich writings. This goes right along with Suzanne Reid’s book as she had said, “. . .time line of main events that led up to (an example) American Revolution giving full details by the readings –then take up what they say and clarify by using pictures”-giving time for speech and write as much as possible (p9) Suzanne E. Reid’s *Book Bridges for ESL Students* 2002-2004.

At the end of the school year, a story is taken either from social studies, a reading book, and the students originate their own play from the readings. They hear the need for a narrator, the sound effects using onomatopoeia words, the characters and what they should say, the props for a setting or scene, the clothing, etc. This way they can do something that is both fun and creative, in the pursuit of reading fluency over the summer, with their friends and relatives.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, an efficient job of teaching the concept of reading fluency is like a waterfall pouring into its basin. They both contain refreshing, vibrant, and potential energy that is resourceful to all mankind.

References

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See: www.nationalforum.com