Traditional and Innovative Approaches to Fluency Development: The Neglected Area of the Curriculum
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ABSTRACT

In the past, fluency has been considered a neglected area of reading instruction, but it is unequivocally an essential component of an effective reading program. For children to develop into confident, fluent readers, they must be exposed to a variety of meaningful strategies that provide plenty of successful reading practice. Teachers that implement traditional approaches can complement their instruction with more innovative approaches to fluency development by integrating technology into the curriculum. These innovative, multisensory approaches to fluency development will encourage struggling and resistant readers to work on their fluency skills through the use of information and communication technology.

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What strategies can teachers use to foster fluency and reading comprehension in the elementary and secondary classroom? The International Reading Association (IRA, 1999) cites fluency as being one of the five priority areas of reading instruction and recommends effective strategies for teaching this skill. As teachers, we realize that it is crucial for us to use a variety of successful strategies to improve fluency in order to enhance comprehension and reading enjoyment. "Fluency instruction is important, and it can be developed by the teacher modeling fluent reading, and by having students engage in repeated oral reading" (IRA, 1999).

According to Allington (2001), reading fluency is a neglected area of the literacy curriculum. Children are taught to decode words accurately, but lack explicit instruction in reading fluency. The National Institute for Literacy (2001) concurs that one critical factor for reading comprehension is fluency.

The report of the National Reading Panel (2000) also indicates that reading fluency is one area that holds great promise for improving student reading. It is important for students to be fluent readers because learners who are not reading at their independent reading level spend more time on decoding than they do on understanding the meaning of a text. Therefore students who do not develop reading fluency, regardless of how bright they are, are likely to remain poor readers throughout their lives (National Reading Panel, 2000). The National Reading Panel Report (2000) suggests that one of the most effective ways to develop reading fluency is through repetitive reading practice. There are many traditional strategies and newer, technology-based interventions that teachers can use to support reading fluency and accelerate reading achievement through meaningful repetitive reading activities.

This article will present strategies for multiple opportunities for repeated reading of connected texts to develop fluency. The traditional methods of encouraging repeated reading include Paired Reading, Guided Reading, and Readers' Theater. Technology is another progressive and powerful

approach to fluency development that is highly motivating and educational for students at varying reading levels. Assistive technologies capture students' attention as the Internet and specialized software packages use multisensory approaches for fluency development.

What is Reading Fluency and Why is it Important?

Reading fluency is defined as the ability to read orally with accuracy, and with an appropriate rate, expression, and phrasing (http://www.ed.gov). Fluency in oral reading involves the ability to read both smoothly and accurately. It also is quick, expressive, and meaningful (Flippo, 2003). Many researchers agree that fluent reading is highly correlated with measures of reading comprehension; therefore as automaticity and fluency develop, readers can read more quickly and concentrate more fully on the meaning of what is read (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborne, 2001; NAEP Study, 2000; Chall, 1983). Dowhower (1994) reported that the research on the positive effects of repeated reading was so strong that it should be "woven into the very fabric of daily literacy instruction" (p. 343).

Once fluency is mastered, students can focus on making connections with the text and their background knowledge instead of exerting cognitive energy on decoding. Fluent readers are able to focus on comprehending the text and not on decoding and assessing individual words. Students who are not fluent readers, often read in a halving word-by-word fashion. They also read at a slower pace and pause frequently.   Reading may sound like this: I/ may/ go/ to/ the/p/a/r/k.

Traditional Approaches for Developing Oral Reading Fluency

Perhaps the best known reading intervention designed to support fluency development is the Repeated Reading Approach (Cunningham & Allington, 1999). The basic method of repeated readings was developed by Samuel and Dahl (1979), and numerous research studies (O'Shea, & O'Shea, 1988; Samuels, 1979) have documented the impact of repeated reading in improving reading fluency and word recognition accuracy.

When using this strategy, students reread an excerpt from a book three to five times in an effort to improve their reading rate and decrease the number of errors they make. These selections (50-200 words) are from stories that students would be too difficult to read fluently by themselves. As reading rate increases, students' attitudes toward reading improve because they can better understand the material. When reading the same passage over and over, the number of word recognition errors decreases, reading speed increases, and oral reading expression improves. (Samuels, 2002). Thus, repeated reading is an effective strategy because as the student reads aloud, confidence and enthusiasm for developing fluency are heightened.

Paired reading, guided reading, and readers' theater also offer meaningful opportunities for conducting repeated readings that are conducive to the development of fluency skills.   A brief description of each approach follows.

Paired reading. Samuels (2002) suggests that teachers pair students together for oral repeated reading. He recommends that students read the text at least three times. The first time the student reads the text aloud with the teacher. Then, the student reads the passage to herself. Finally, the student can be paired with a partner and rereads the text. While the learner is reading, the partner provides feedback about the tone and style. After the reading, a listening chart is used to evaluate a partner's reading.

Paired reading is an effective strategy designed to help students develop reading fluency by providing practice in dyads for approximately 15-20 minutes per day (Koskinen, & Blum, 1986).   In this

procedure, a fluent student is partnered with a student who is having difficulty. Students read material, using short passages or excerpts from books (50-100) that are predictable and at a level that guarantee success (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000)

During paired reading a learner and a skilled reader read a text together. The learner takes over the reading where he or she feels comfortable to do so, and the skilled reader acts as a support by modeling fluent reading and offering feedback. The advantage of paired reading is that it builds confidence by allowing the reader to make the choice about when to join in the reading. The technique allows for students to be supported while reading texts of greater difficulty levels than they would be able to read at their independent level.

Topping and Whitley (1990) used a sample of over 1000 adult tutors and a structured questionnaire to collect research data on the effectiveness of the paired reading strategy. Seventy percent of the respondents felt that their tutee was reading more accurately, more fluently and with better comprehension after paired reading. Greater confidence in reading was noted by 78% by the tutors. Teachers reported generalized reading progress in the classroom in a slightly smaller proportion of cases. Of a sample of 964 students who completed the questionnaire, 95% felt that they were better at reading after paired reading, 92% liked reading more, 87% found it easy to learn to do, 83% liked doing it, and 70% said they would continue using the strategy.

Guided repeated oral reading. Research conducted by the National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that guided repeated oral reading procedures that included direction from teachers, peers, or parents had a significant and positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension across a range of grade levels. The goal of guided oral reading is for students to become fluent readers who can problem solve strategically and read independently and silently. Students develop as individual readers while being involved in a supported activity. During the guided reading lesson, students have the opportunity to develop and use reading strategies so they can read progressively difficult texts independently. They experience success in reading for meaning and learning how to problem solve independently with a new text. Teachers use running records to assess student growth by observing individual students as they problem solve new texts. During guided oral reading, teachers support students' reading and their use of reading strategies (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

According to Tompkins (2003), guided oral reading lessons include prereading, reading, responding, exploring, and applying. During *prereading*, the teacher activates students' prior knowledge by reading the book title and author's name aloud from a big book. Students are encouraged to make predictions based on the picture on the front cover and the title of the story. The second step, *reading*, involves the teacher reading the book aloud and tracking print as the group reads. The teacher reads with appropriate expression and encourages students to join in on recognizable and rhythmic lines of the story. During this stage, the teacher is modeling fluent reading and is providing an example of how reading should sound. The third step, *responding*, requires students to dialogue and interact with the topics in the book. The teacher asks questions that help students make connections between their own lives and the situations and characters in the story. The fourth stage, *exploring*, calls for teachers and students to reread the book over several days. Students practice familiar and predictable words, and become increasingly able to read more and more of the text. This stage also emphasizes the modeling of expression. The final stage, *applying*, allows students to use their newly acquired words in an authentic setting by utilizing the text for writing activities.

An important component of guided oral reading is assessment. Teachers observe and listen as students read. According to Tompkins (2001) teachers assess students' reading fluency by listening to

them read aloud. The teacher assesses fluency according to four factors: speed, phrasing, prosody, and automaticity. During this time, the teacher charts student fluency through running records and anecdotal records as the student attempts to identify words and use strategies to solve reading problems. Guided oral reading helps the teacher to determine whether the children are reading at the appropriate instructional level and whether they are progressing to more difficult levels of books.

   Readers' theater. Struggling readers at all levels need highly motivating opportunities to engage in reading on a daily basis. Readers' theater scripts are play-like scripts that provide practice in oral reading, fluent delivery and correct expression through characterization. By using readers' theater scripts, teachers encourage students to read with expression and to practice important fluency attributes, such as pausing, inflection, and intonation. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1999) found that using readers' theater scripts results in significant improvement in second graders' reading fluency.

   Readers' theater allows a small group of students to perform a text. Students sit in front of the class, and after a great deal of rereading, read and perform the script.   Readers' theater motivates reluctant readers and provides fluent readers with the opportunity to delve into genre and characterization. It does this by allowing challenged readers to rehearse their lines before presenting their part to the class. A successful performance leads to increased self-confidence and a boost in motivation to read. The Readers' theater strategy focuses on developing reading fluency, improving comprehension through interpretive reading, and enhancing motivation to read. Scripts can be teacher-made, student-generated or found on the Internet.   To find Internet sites for scripts, go to Google's website and enter the keyword, "readers' theater" (www.google.com). You may go directly to Aaron Shepard's Home Page for *Stories on Stage*, scripts for Readers' theater performances (www.aaronshep.com). Another valuable website is the Readers Theater/Language Arts for Teachers Home Page (http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/rcswallow/). This site contains over 30 free scripts to use at the elementary level. For step-by-step directions on how students can create their own readers theater scripts, log on to Reader's Theatre Basics website (http://bms.westport.k12.ct.us/ mccormick/rt/RTHOME.htm).

Assistive Technologies

   Assistive technology is an interactive, educational, and motivating tool that is used for developing fluency across the grade levels.   It is a multisensory tool and strategy that can help a person accomplish a task that would be difficult or impossible to complete. Opportunities for students to practice reading for automaticity and comprehension include captioned television, the Internet, and educational software programs.

   Captioned television. Reading captioned television programs provide students with opportunities for reading practice that is entertaining and self-correcting. On captioned television programs, sentences corresponding to the words spoken on the video are printed on the screen, much like the subtitles on foreign films (Tompkins, 2003). Captioning allows viewers to read the TV program's dialogue or other information.   It displays up to four lines of script strategically placed on a television screen so as not to interfere with other parts of the picture. Captions are especially useful for hearing-impaired viewers but now have an important instructional function: screen reading (Koskinen, Wilson, & Jensema, 1985). Kroskinen and her colleagues taught 35 second through sixth graders as part of a summer reading clinic to use close captioned television to practice short pieces of script. The researchers provided anecdotal evidence suggesting that less fluent readers and bilingual students become more motivated when they use captioned television and video and researchers felt this strategy improved learners' reading fluency.

Also, innovative approach enables ESL students and hearing impaired students an opportunity to participate in mainstreamed content area classes while developing their own language skills.

  The Internet. The Internet is another valuable tool for developing and improving fluency. Research suggests that teacher modeling and read aloud improve the reading fluency of students (Eldredge & Quinn, 1988; Reitsma, 1988) and the Internet can provide the reading practice needed to help improve fluency. Typically fluent reading is modeled by a teacher, parent, older sibling or friend; however, if no one is available, technology steps in. Technology has often proven helpful to both special needs learners as well as English as-a-second language learners because there are many resources on the web that allow students to progress at an individual pace. Another reason is that specific sites allow learners to reread stories and passages that are vocalized through Internet access. Students can imitate the intonation and flow of language by listening as fluent readers model appropriate reading behaviors.

  There are many engaging and interactive Internets sites students can use to improve their reading fluency. Internet sites like The Amazing Adventure Series contain classic children's stories and poetry in read-along format that offers learners an opportunity to listen to stories and follow along with the text (http://www.amazingadventure.com).   Rasinski (1990) documented improvement in children's fluency skills when students practiced oral reading while listening to the text being read simultaneously. Students can practice reading orally just slightly behind the synthesized voice like a shadow or an echo until they gradually improve over time.

  Another untapped multisensory-strategy that can be accessed on the Internet for developing reading fluency is Karaoke. Karaoke is music played in the background as the words to the song are printed on the screen. Karaoke sound tracks allow the lyrics to scroll across the screen of a standard television or they can be accessed on the Internet and viewed on a computer.

  Children often learn by hearing information set to music. Students' interest and ability in music, complemented by their emotional response to the lyrics, potentially increases prosody and comprehension as they begin to make personal connections to the words in the song. Karaoke requires students to recognize words at first sight, automatically, as they are set to music. As students sing the lyrics to their favorite songs, they need to read with speed and expression as the words appear on the screen. Beyond decoding the words, readers group the words into meaningful phrases and use their voices to express the words on the screen. Therefore, reading with proper phrasing and expression helps readers construct meaning from the text.

   Students can create their own lyrics set to music or create their own choral performance for the class.   This strategy provides a motivational way for children to practice and reread a text to improve fluency and comprehension.   By using Karaoke to develop fluency, students become familiar reading or interpreting a refrain or lyric while reacting to the mood or feeling of the words.

  Students can sing the song in unison, have different parts, or join in at the refrain.   For example, at the site of Mightybook readers can develop their fluency skills by accessing one of the sixty read-alouds, electronic books, music videos or Karaoke songs organized by age group and reading level (http://www.mightybook.com). On this site, students can sing Karaoke songs and follow along with the words as they are read aloud and highlighted. For example, when a student clicks on the option "When a Baboon's Not," and selects the Karaoke option, a catchy tune is played and the words are highlighted so children can follow along. Children can replay these entertaining songs, at different reading levels, as often as they like. The repetitive and engaging nature of these songs, provide successful skill reinforcement at their independent level and practice on their instructional reading level.

The Internet can also be used to access interactive storybook collections for young children. Childrenstory.com provides another valuable resource to help students track words as they read along with the story (http://www.childrenstory.com/ tales/index.html). This site offers a collection of many of the most popular fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*. It includes an option to have the story read aloud using REAL player. Another resource, Room 108 is a site for K-12 children that have stories containing sound and animation (http://netrover.com/ ~kingskid/108.html). This site provides songs with lyrics for following along and includes a group of animated books based on the Dolch sight word list that allows children to hear the correct pronunciation.   The voice on the computer reads a passage to the listener as words appear on the screen so the child can follow along. Another advantage is that the students are listening to a fluent rendition of the text as the storyteller is modeling smooth reading.

Software. Although many quality Internet sites offer programs that can be downloaded or readily accessed on the World Wide Web, many quality software programs can be purchased from software companies. Software offers yet another method of improving student's reading fluency. For example, Mercer Meyer's, *Just Grandma and Me* (2004) by The Learning Company and distributed by Broderbund, allows lower elementary school aged children to read along with the highlighted text. (Summaries of Mercer Mayer's animated stories can be found at http://www.kidsclick.com/descrip/justme_grandma.htm).   This software package not only facilitates fluency, but teaches children about directionality, uses pictorial clues, and features repeated readings. Uniquely, this software can be read in many languages including Spanish, French, German and Japanese. This feature is especially useful for students whose first language is not English because it allows them to follow the story in their primary language and build confidence as they develop reading fluency. Students can also highlight words that are confusing and that might slow down their reading.   In addition, children can click on particular words to hear them read aloud. Time is given between each page so that the children can begin reading silently at first. Then, the child may decide to join in chorally with the reader.

Electronic books also have the potential to use to improve fluency skills for both mainstream and learning disabled students. Electronic books, or eBooks, are innovative resources that can be downloaded by using the Internet or can be purchased as software programs. They are cutting-edge digitized versions of books that can be read on a computer.

eBooks offer many specialized applications that are valuable to the development of fluency skills. Many are enhanced with music, external links, simulations and sound effects that keep students interested in the topic and in reading.   Several offer additional features such as the ability to highlight text, bookmark a page, or look up an unfamiliar word in a dictionary. These features can prove useful for students with fluency problems because they can keep track of their progress and return to sections that they may have struggled with earlier. Additionally, teachers can customize their own e-books to meet the specific reading needs of their students. In this way, readers can practice specific words or phrases to develop their fluency.

With eBooks, the teacher or the student can adjust font size and page colors to support the needs or preferences of their students. eBooks let students search the text quickly for specific words or phrases that cause difficulty so that during the next reading, their word identification skills improve. More advanced eBooks include hyperlinks and other reading options that promote active learning. These options include quick and easy reference tools like dictionaries and synonym features that broaden vocabulary. Reading progress is tracked and stored by the computer over time so teachers can have easy access to progress reports and can readily adapt instruction to meet their students' changing needs.

When using eBooks, teachers can customize the text to address the reading needs of diverse students. For example, text can then be scanned into the computer and the optical character reader can translates it into a digital format so that it can be read and edited. Once the text is pasted into the Talking Word Processor, the teacher may decide to edit the text by eliminating parts that may be too difficult for the reader to decode. The teacher can also magnify the font (1 to 16 times) to make reading easier, or opt to have the text read aloud. (For a free, online demonstration of an eBbook, log on to http://www.magickeys.com/ebooks/demo.html).

Talking Word Processors (TWP) can be purchased separately from eBooks or can be used as part of a package. With TWPs, students can invent their own creative stories or listen to narratives read to them on Talking Word Processors (TWP). "Computers, especially those equipped with devices that produce artificial speech, may provide an effective means for increasing decoding skills and reading fluency (Reinking, 1995)."   Software programs for TWPs are now available that provide artificial speech feedback. As the student writes, each letter is echoed as it is typed and each word is vocalized as the spacebar is pressed. Many of these inexpensive programs, typically used to assist with writing, also incorporate powerful tools for reading. Students with reading difficulties can create and edit a story that they've written and have it imported into a TWP. After it has been imported, the text can be read aloud to the student.

These TWP programs offer other adjustments such as enlarging the size of the text and changing the foreground or background color and highlighting text to assist students in following along. Also, TWP programs offer a variety of reading voices from which to choose. Many features can be adjusted to accommodate students' varying reading rates while maintaining speech flow and inflection.   Another program feature that helps with editing and comprehending information is the software's ability to re-read the text word by word, sentence by sentence or by the total page, as often as the students want. These features allow students more control over their learning process as they develop and refine their fluency skills.

There are several methods for inputting text into the talking word processor. New information can be imported into a talking word processor by typing directly into a file, copying text from another file or electronic resource and then pasting it into the word processor. This converts printed text into a digital format. Once text is in digital format it can be accessed and manipulated in a variety of ways.

Kurzweil Educational System software (http://www.kurzweiledu.com/) sells software that helps disabled learners read more fluently by improving students' reading speed and comprehension. This is done by highlighting the text as it is spoken aloud. Users can read along, take notes, and highlight right on the computer screen. In this version, words are highlighted in a contrasting color making tracking easier. This multisensory approach helps improve fluency and increase comprehension for struggling students.

Conclusion

In the past, fluency has been identified as the neglected area of reading instruction. Now, it is regarded as an essential component of an effective reading program. For children to develop into confident, fluent readers, they must be exposed to a variety of meaningful strategies that provide plenty of successful reading practice. Along with more traditional approaches to improve fluency, such as choral reading, rereading, or practice during independent reading (such as during sustained silent reading), teachers can complement their instruction with more innovative approaches to fluency development by integrating technology into the curriculum. These innovative, multisensory approaches to fluency

development may encourage struggling and resistant readers to improve their fluency through the use of a medium that many students find engaging and entertaining.

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