

Developing Reading Fluency by Combining Timed Reading and Repeated Reading

by ETHAN M. LYNN



I am responsible for teaching reading classes and overseeing the reading curriculum at an intensive English program in the United States. As an institution, we strive to make reading fluency a priority in the classroom, but after conducting a basic overview of the literature on the topic, I realized that our approach could be improved through simple modifications. Specifically, the literature mentions that fluency activities ought to be easy (Anderson 2013; Millett 2008; Nation

2009)—that is, grammatical structures should be understandable, and there should be no unknown vocabulary.

However, the fluency materials used at our institution were not necessarily easy. Because our institution spent money on and developed some of these materials, which were already embedded into the curriculum, I decided that modifying the use of these materials would be the best option.

The main goals are to increase students' reading fluency and rate, enhance student confidence, and promote learner self-awareness.

Drawing upon the work of Chang and Millett (2013), I created a systematic fluency program that merged both timed reading (Millett 2008; Nation 2009) and repeated reading to optimize the use of our reading fluency materials.

The technique is adaptable for use with nearly all skill levels, and it typically requires about 15 to 20 minutes of class time. The main goals are to increase students' reading fluency and rate, enhance student confidence, and promote learner self-awareness.

You will need the following materials:

- A specifically designed timed reading passage or any reading passage
- A reading fluency progress sheet
- A timing device
- A pencil or pen for each student
- A calculator to determine words-per-minute (sometimes abbreviated as “WPM”) rate and comprehension score (optional)

PREPARATION

1. Decide what you would like your students to read. You can select passages that are specifically designed for timed reading, or you can choose any reading passage you desire. Make sure that the materials used are relatively easy—again, the passage should use vocabulary that your students understand and grammatical structures they already know. Given that almost every class has students at differing levels of proficiency, it is

likely that some students will come across unknown vocabulary and difficult grammar in every passage; the underlying principle is to avoid overly difficult texts. In addition, select passages that are relatively short. Millett (2017) uses passages of between 300 and 400 words.

Materials specifically designed for timed reading will already have questions for each passage; if you use a reading passage that is not specifically designed for timed reading, you will need to create anywhere from four to ten questions. When you create questions, make sure they are multiple choice and that they focus primarily on the main idea(s) of the passage (see Millett 2017).

2. Print the reading fluency progress sheet (see Figure 1) so that it can be handed out to students. (Note that while the sample progress sheet in Figure 1 has five lines, actual progress sheets can include additional rows to allow students to add more information.) If this is not possible, plan to have students record their progress in a systematic manner on a piece of paper, following the basic format of the progress sheet. I like to keep the progress sheets between classes so that I can evaluate student progress and prevent the almost inevitable case of a sheet being lost.

PROCEDURE

I usually guide the entire class through the procedure the first two times and then let students work at their own pace during subsequent classes.

If you use a reading passage that is not specifically designed for timed reading, you will need to create anywhere from four to ten questions.

1. Hand out the reading fluency progress sheets to students or have them copy the chart on a piece of paper.
2. Hand out the reading passage or tell students which passage (if it is in their course book) they will read. Students record the date and the title of the passage on their progress sheets.
3. Students set and write a words-per-minute goal for the first reading of the passage. At the beginning of the term, students are generally not aware of their reading abilities in terms of how many words they can read per minute, and they struggle to set meaningful goals. Therefore, I encourage students to set a goal of 200 words per minute for the first two or three readings (see Anderson 2013). For subsequent readings, students can consider the text difficulty and topic along with their performance up to that point in the term before setting a goal.
4. Tell students that they will read the passage silently and that they should time themselves—that is, when they finish, they will check to see how long it took them to read the passage. Tell them that as they read, they should not look up the meaning of words they do not know.
5. Students read the entire passage, silently and as quickly as possible. In order for students to time themselves, you can display a stopwatch for all to see or have students time themselves individually using a stopwatch on their phones.
6. Students record their reading rate in words per minute. Materials that are specifically designed for these activities usually have charts that make the conversion from time to words per minute simple. If a chart is not available, you can use this formula: $([\text{total words in passage}] / [\text{time in seconds}]) \times 60$.
7. Students then scan the text for any unfamiliar vocabulary. They look up

| | Date | Title of Reading Passage | WPM Goal #1 | WPM Attempt #1 | WPM Goal #2 | WPM Attempt #2 | Comprehension Score |
|---|------|--------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1 | | | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | | |
| 4 | | | | | | | |
| 5 | | | | | | | |

Figure 1. Sample reading fluency progress sheet

From my teaching experience, I have noticed that this activity helps my students become more fluent readers.

the definitions and record these new words in a notebook. This ensures that the subsequent reading will be easier because there should not be any unknown vocabulary. As mentioned previously, there will inevitably be unknown vocabulary for some students due to differing levels of proficiency with a given class.

8. Students set and write a second words-per-minute goal.
9. Students again read the entire passage, silently and as quickly as possible, without stopping to look up words. They should track the time as they did during the first reading, as described in Step 5.
10. Students record their reading rate for the second reading of the passage in words per minute.
11. Without referring to the text, students answer comprehension questions about the passage. Materials that are specifically designed for these activities already have questions. If you are using materials without questions, you can create your own appropriate questions, as mentioned in Preparation Step 1.
12. Students check their answers and record their comprehension score; for example, if they answer eight of ten questions correctly, they could write “80%.”

CONCLUSION

This activity can be an effective way to begin most reading classes. I use it to start two of my four weekly classes. After the activity, I like to review student progress and give praise

to my students as they progress. Because students set goals and record their progress, they become self-aware of and motivated by their progress. From my teaching experience, I have noticed that this activity helps my students become more fluent readers, and I have noticed that my students feel that this activity is a good use of time. Another benefit of this activity is that students receive regular opportunities for reading practice. I recommend, though, that teachers first try this activity themselves, as readers, to understand what the experience is like and to become confident when they use this technique with their students.

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Ethan M. Lynn, a native of Cincinnati, Ohio, is the reading skill area supervisor in Brigham Young University’s intensive English program. In the fall of 2018, he will begin studying for his PhD in applied linguistics at Northern Arizona University, where he hopes to further pursue his research interests in L2 reading.