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Three Interactive Alternatives for Developing Reading Fluency

In recent years, I. S. P. Nation's *four strands of language learning* has become somewhat of a syllabus-design touchstone, providing valuable guidance for course developers in the field of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) in creating well-balanced language courses (see Nation and Yamamoto 2012). According to Nation (2009, 1), all four strands—*meaning-focused input*, *meaning-focused output*, *language-focused learning*, and *fluency development*—should play a central role in language courses, and Nation recommends that "equal time is given to each of the four strands."

Over the past several years, I have been using Nation's four strands model as the main conceptual framework for a master's-level TESOL practicum course I teach in the Japanese EFL context. As part of this course, student teachers conduct microteaching sessions with other class members. Following each session, we use the framework as a means to categorize the various activities into strands and as a basis for reflective discussions. The framework has helped to stimulate fruitful discussion about key issues, such as the difference between language-focused tasks and meaning-focused tasks, while raising awareness of the proportion of class time teachers allot to each strand.

One common observation that emerges in classes is the challenge of implementing the fluency strand—especially for developing reading fluency (see Chung and Nation 2006; Gorsuch and Taguchi 2008; Grabe 2010; and Iwahori 2008 for discussions of reading-fluency development). Nation and Newton (2009, 9) describe fluency-development activities as "time out from learning new items and … a time for getting good at using what is already known." According to Nation (2009, 66), four conditions must be present for an activity to be categorized as fluency development:

- Learners' attention must be focused on the meaning of the text they are reading rather than its grammatical or structural features.
- There should be no new vocabulary and few irregular language features in the passages. Thus, the reading "material should be easy" for learners (Nation 2009, 66).
- There needs to "be some pressure to perform at a faster than normal speed" (Nation 2009, 66).
- Fluency-based practice needs to occur regularly; that is, there should be a large quantity of input/output.

Nation and Newton (2009, 9) are clear that if any one of these four conditions is absent from an activity, "it is not a fluency activity."

The activities are highly interactive and can be used to focus on different reading skills such as identifying specific information, comprehending main ideas, and predicting/inferencing.

The traditional technique recommended by Nation (2009) for reading fluency is speed reading. This procedure involves learners regularly reading from a book with a large number of passages (a large amount of input) that are carefully crafted to include high-frequency vocabulary (easy), answering comprehension questions based on the passages (meaning-focused), and recording their reading rates in graphs at the end of the book (pressure to perform faster). (See Nation and Malarcher [2007] and Quinn, Nation, and Millett [2007] for speed-reading resources.)

Aside from speed reading, however, there appear to be few activities that meet all of Nation's rather strict conditions for a reading-fluency task (see Nation 2009, 65–68 for a discussion of other fluency-based activities). Repeated-reading activities, for example, meet the condition of being "easy" because passages are read multiple times and can be adapted to include a "pressure to perform faster" by encouraging learners to improve on their times with each reading (Iwahori 2008). However, as Myskow, Underwood, and Waring (2019) point out, since students read the same passage multiple times, it is doubtful they are attending to its meaning.

Another challenge of implementing fluency-development activities is locating a sufficient number of level-appropriate reading passages. Having students purchase a separate textbook for speed reading in addition to other required course texts may not be feasible in many contexts. While graded readers in extensive-reading libraries are valuable resources for addressing the fluency component of a reading program, ensuring that the library is stocked with a variety of engaging texts at different reading levels can be a financial burden for institutions (Day and Bamford 1998). Furthermore, fluency-focused reading activities such as speed reading do not tend to be very interactive, which may be a concern for teachers who want to make the most of the opportunities for face-to-face interaction that classrooms offer. Considering these challenges, it is perhaps not surprising that reading fluency has been called "the forgotten dimension of reading success" (Samuels and Farstrup 2006).

This article presents three reading activities (*Start-up!*, *Pop-up!*, and *End-up!*) that are designed to meet Nation's (2009) four conditions for fluency development. *Start-up!* and *End-up!* are introduced for the first time here, and *Pop-up!* is introduced in Myskow, Underwood, and Waring (2019) and discussed further in Myskow et al. (2018). The step-by-step procedures for each activity are illustrated by using a short sample text consisting of two paragraphs. The activities are highly interactive and can be used to focus on different reading skills such as identifying specific information, comprehending main ideas, and predicting/inferencing. These activities require no additional materials beyond the course textbook and handouts developed by the teacher. The following sections present each of these activities in turn.

FLUENCY ACTIVITY 1: *START-UP!*

This activity is especially well suited to reading for main ideas of paragraphs. Its procedure is as follows:

1. The teacher prepares two versions of the same text, one for Student A and one for Student B. Each version has a main-ideas type of question at the beginning of different paragraphs.

2. The teacher instructs Students A and B to individually answer the questions on

their sheets. Students may check their answers by consulting an answer key at the bottom of their sheet.

3. Student A says, "Start up!" and reads aloud the question at the beginning of the paragraph, while Student B looks up and listens.

4. Student B reads the paragraph aloud to find the answer to the question, while Student A follows along quietly.

5. After reading the first paragraph, Student B looks up and answers the question. If the answer is correct, students switch roles for the next paragraph. If the answer is not correct, Student B must start reading again from the beginning.

6. In groups of four—two pairs—each pair of students competes against the other pair to finish all paragraphs and answer all questions correctly first.

Figures 1a and 1b show sample *Start-up!* materials for Students A and B. The reading passage, on the topic of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, has been adapted from materials developed by the author for use in a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)–based U.S. history course. The choice of topic is up to the teacher; the activity can be used with any subject matter or genre. What is important is that passages have already been studied in class and that learners are familiar with all vocabulary and expressions that appear in the passages. This ensures that the activity meets Nation's (2009) fluency condition for being "easy," enabling readers to focus their attention on practicing what they already know.

The reason for creating separate reading passages for Student A and Student B (Step 1) is to avoid confusion about which parts students should read and which questions they should ask and answer. It also prevents students from looking ahead and answering questions about their parts before beginning the activity. As Step 2 indicates, students are to begin by individually locating answers to prewritten questions about the main ideas of the text's paragraphs. Student A finds the answers to questions about odd-numbered paragraphs, while Student B does the same for even-numbered questions.

After students complete Step 2—finding the answers to their partners' paragraph questions—they are ready to begin the activity. Student A begins by saying, "Start up!" This signals Student B to raise his or her head so as to look away from the passage. Student A then asks the following main-idea question about the first paragraph: "True or False? The next paragraph is mainly about Roosevelt's economic policies." It is important that students clearly understand the question before reading the paragraph, so Student B should signal that he or she understands the question or ask Student A to repeat it.

After confirming that he or she understands the question, Student B begins reading the paragraph aloud to find the answer while Student A follows along silently. When Student B finishes reading the paragraph, he or she looks up again and verbally answers the True/False main-idea question. If Student A determines that the answer is correct, students switch roles and repeat the procedure for the next paragraph. If the answer is incorrect, Student B must return to the beginning and read the paragraph again. Students continue in this way until all paragraphs have been read aloud and the questions have been answered correctly. Pairs compete against other pairs to finish first.

Teachers might have a concern that the competitive aspect of this activity will cause some students to skip steps or cut corners by, for example, not returning to the beginning of the passage when they answer a question incorrectly. One way teachers might address this concern is to assign a fifth student the role of "referee" to oversee two pairs of students as they perform the activity. However, this would mean that the referees would not have a chance to participate in the activity. Perhaps the simplest solution is to carefully model and

Student A Handout

Start-up! Reading-Fluency Race

With a partner, you will compete against another pair to be the first to finish reading a passage and answering questions about it. Before you begin, make sure you understand the correct answers to the questions below.

Say, "Start up!" and ask your partner the following question:

1. True or False? The next paragraph is mainly about Roosevelt's economic policies.

[Read along silently]: In March 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became the 32nd president of the United States. In his first speech as president, he famously said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." At the time, stock markets had hit record lows, and banks were failing. Nearly 25% of Americans were unemployed, and many were homeless. It was the height of the Great Depression.

Now listen as your partner says, "Start up!" and asks you a question. Then read the paragraph and answer the question when you are finished reading.

[Read aloud]: Throughout the decade, FDR implemented important new economic reforms. Their purpose was to help the country recover from the economic crisis and to prevent future crises from occurring. This collection of bold new programs was known as the New Deal, and it had a major impact, not only on the U.S. economy of the 1930s, but on the direction of the country.

Figure 1a. *Start-up!* Student A sample handout

Student B Handout

Start-up! Reading-Fluency Race

With a partner, you will compete against another pair to be the first to finish reading a passage and answering questions about it. Before you begin, make sure you understand the correct answers to the questions below.

Listen as your partner says, "Start up!" and asks you a question. Then read the paragraph and answer the question when you are finished reading.

[Read aloud]: In March 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became the 32nd president of the United States. In his first speech as president, he famously said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." At the time, stock markets had hit record lows, and banks were failing. Nearly 25% of Americans were unemployed, and many were homeless. It was the height of the Great Depression.

Say, "Start up!"' and ask your partner the following question:

2. True or False? The next paragraph is mainly about Roosevelt's New Deal.

[Read along silently]: Throughout the decade, FDR implemented important new economic reforms. Their purpose was to help the country recover from the economic crisis and to prevent future crises from occurring. This collection of bold new programs was known as the New Deal, and it had a major impact, not only on the U.S. economy of the 1930s, but on the direction of the country.

Figure 1b. *Start-up!* Student B sample handout

The pressure of reading in front of others is greatly reduced by the requirement that students read only to a partner rather than to the class and the teacher.

explain the activity so that students clearly understand what is expected of them.

The activity as outlined here meets all of Nation's (2009) conditions for fluency development. First, as mentioned already, the condition that *all language is familiar* to learners is met by having students reread a text they have already studied in class. Second, the inclusion of comprehension questions focuses learners' attention on the *meaning* of the passage. Third, the condition for *a large amount of input* can be addressed by performing the activity regularly, using other reading passages studied in class. Finally, the requirement that pairs compete against others ensures there is a *pressure to perform faster*.

This activity need not be confined to questions about main ideas. However, this question type is especially well suited to the *Start-up!* activity. Unlike other types of questions that ask students to locate or comprehend specific information in a text, main-idea questions require readers to attain a global understanding of the paragraph as a collective semantic unit. Thus, with this question type, there is less likelihood that readers will stop attending to the meaning of the passage once they locate a particular piece of information.

One potential concern teachers may have with this activity (and the others outlined here) is that students might find it difficult to attend to the text's meaning when reading aloud. Zutell and Rasinski (1991) observe that reading aloud in front of others may cause learners to become overly self-conscious, leading them to devote their attention to the correct pronunciation of individual words. The authors also point out, however, that this issue tends to occur when teachers pay excessive attention to pronunciation, especially when they "correct each oral error when it occurs" (Zutell and Rasinski 1991, 211). The particular design of the reading-fluency activities presented here helps to allay this concern. First, the pressure of reading in front of others is greatly reduced by the requirement that students read only to a partner rather than to the class and the teacher. Because half the class is reading aloud at the same time, there is less concern that others are listening in. Second, as the fluency activities presented here are intended to be used at the end of the instructional sequence—after students have had a chance to study the text in detail—there is less likelihood that students would stumble over the meanings and pronunciation of individual words and phrases. Finally, the task specifications for students to read quickly to find the answers to specific questions encourages them to focus on meaning rather than correct pronunciation.

FLUENCY ACTIVITY 2: *POP-UP!*

The *Pop-up!* reading-fluency activity, first presented in Myskow, Underwood, and Waring (2019) and described in more detail in Myskow et al. (2018), is further developed and illustrated here, using the same reading materials about Roosevelt's New Deal. The procedure for *Pop-up!* is similar to the procedure for *Start-up!* in that students first work individually to find answers to prewritten questions. Unlike in *Start-up!*, however, the questions are not asked at the beginning of paragraphs; they are asked intermittently and without warning throughout each paragraph. For students reading aloud, therefore, questions will suddenly appear or "pop up"—an experience like seeing or hearing "the annoying advertisements that 'pop up' when viewing pages on the Internet" (Myskow, Underwood, and Waring, 2019, 56). Because questions about details emerge unexpectedly throughout the reading process, this

activity—unlike the previous one that focuses on main ideas—is well suited to reading-for-specific-information questions. The procedure for *Pop-up!* is as follows:

1. The teacher prepares two versions of the same text, one for Student A and one for Student B. Each version has details-type questions throughout different paragraphs.

2. The teacher instructs Students A and B to individually answer the questions on their sheets. Students may check their answers by consulting an answer key at the bottom of their sheet.

3. Student B begins reading aloud, while Student A follows along quietly.

4. When Student B reads to the end of a sentence that contains a question, Student A says, "Pop up!" and asks a question written on the sheet. If Student B's answer is correct, Student B continues reading. If it is not correct, Student B must start again from the beginning of the paragraph.

5. When Student B finishes reading the paragraph and has answered the question(s) correctly, students switch roles for the next paragraph.

6. In groups of four—two pairs—each pair of students competes against the other pair to finish all paragraphs and answer all questions correctly first.

As Step 4 indicates, when students read the answer to one of the questions, their partners wait until they get to the end of the sentence before saying, "Pop up!" and asking the question. This forces readers to carefully attend to the meaning of each sentence because they do not know when they will be asked a question about it. As in *Start-up!*, students who are reading aloud must stop and look up from the text when questions are being asked and answered. If they are unable to answer the question correctly, they must return to the beginning of the paragraph and start reading again. And, as in *Start-up!*, students switch roles after each paragraph and compete against other pairs to finish first.

Figures 2a and 2b display sample materials for the *Pop-up!* activity. The questions, located in the left-side columns, are short and simple, and they refer to discrete bits of information in the passage. In Figure 2a, for example, the first question asks the reader to simply recall the year that Roosevelt became president. Though this question requires students to carefully attend to what they are reading, it should not be too challenging because students answer it as soon as they finish reading the relevant sentence. A less-effective question for this activity would be one that asks, "What did Roosevelt say in his first speech as president?" While the answer is a discrete piece of information ("The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"), it is probably too long to expect students to accurately reproduce while they are looking up from the passage.

Questions for *Pop-up!* (and the other activities outlined here) should be designed to elicit information that students are unlikely to recall from their previous readings of the text. While learners will probably not recollect specific details like dates and numbers from previous encounters with the text, more-general questions—such as "Which president proposed the New Deal?"—might be answered with their existing knowledge of the topic and thus without attending to the meaning of the passage. Therefore, for this activity to be successful, questions must have a clear and simple construction and must elicit information that is specific, yet inconspicuous.

FLUENCY ACTIVITY 3: *END-UP!*

The final activity in this series is *End-up!* It follows the same basic procedure and uses the same text as the other two activities. However, in this activity, questions are not asked at the beginning of paragraphs (as in *Start-up!*) or throughout (as in *Pop-up!*). Instead, questions are asked at *the end* of each paragraph. Of the

Student A Handout

Pop-up! Reading-Fluency Race

With a partner, you will compete against another pair to be the first to finish reading a passage and answering questions about it. Before you begin, make sure you understand the correct answers to the questions below.

Your partner will read the following paragraph aloud. When he or she reads the answer to a question, wait until your partner reads to the end of the sentence. Then say, "Pop up!" and ask the question.

Pop-up! In what year did FDR become president?

[Read along silently]: In March 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became the 32nd president of the United States. In his first speech as president, he famously said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." At the time, stock markets had hit record lows, and banks were failing. Nearly 25% of Americans were unemployed, and many were homeless. It was the height of the Great Depression.

Pop-up! How many Americans were unemployed?

As you read the following paragraph aloud, your partner will say, "Pop up!" and ask you questions about it.

[Read aloud]: Throughout the decade, FDR implemented important new economic reforms. Their purpose was to help the country recover from the economic crisis and to prevent future crises from occurring. This collection of bold new programs was known as the New Deal, and it had a major impact, not only on the U.S. economy of the 1930s, but on the direction of the country.

Figure 2a. *Pop-up!* Student A sample handout

Student B Handout

Pop-up! Reading-Fluency Race

With a partner, you will compete against another pair to be the first to finish reading a passage and answering questions about it. Before you begin, make sure you understand the correct answers to the questions below.

As you read the following paragraph aloud, your partner will say, "Pop up!" and ask you questions about it.

[Read aloud]: In March 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became the 32nd president of the United States. In his first speech as president, he famously said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." At the time, stock markets had hit record lows, and banks were failing. Nearly 25% of Americans were unemployed, and many were homeless. It was the height of the Great Depression.

Your partner will read the following paragraph aloud. When he or she reads the answer to a question, wait until your partner reads to the end of the sentence. Then say, "Pop up!" and ask the question.

[Read along silently]: Throughout the decade, FDR implemented important new economic reforms. Their purpose was to help the country recover from the economic crisis and to prevent future crises from occurring. This collection of bold new programs was known as the New Deal, and it had a major impact, not only on the U.S. economy of the 1930s, but on the direction of the country.

Pop-up! What were the bold new reforms called?

Figure 2b. *Pop-up!* Student B sample handout

three activities, *End-up!* is perhaps the most challenging. In contrast to *Start-up!*, where the initial question functions as a direction-setting prompt for readers, the *End-up!* activity contains no such instruction—readers are to answer the questions "cold" at the end of the passage. Thus, this activity would probably not work well with details-type questions that require readers to recall highly specific information like names and dates. One question type that is well suited to the *End-up!* activity is *predicting*. When students reach the end of a paragraph, they use the information they just read to make general predictions about the content of the next paragraph.

The procedure for use with predicting-type questions is as follows:

1. The teacher prepares two versions of the same text, one for Student A and one for Student B. Each version has predicting-type questions at the end of different paragraphs.

2. The teacher instructs Students A and B to individually answer the questions on their sheets. Students may check their answers by consulting an answer key at the bottom of their sheet.

3. Student B begins reading aloud, while Student A follows along silently.

4. When Student B finishes reading the paragraph, Student A says, "End up!" and asks the predicting question written on his or her sheet.

5. If Student B's answer is correct, students switch roles for the next paragraph. If it is not correct, Student B must start again from the beginning of the paragraph.

6. In groups of four—two pairs—each pair of students competes against the other pair to finish all paragraphs and answer all questions correctly first.

For this activity to work effectively, it is important that the questions are not *too* challenging. If the questions are too complex or unclear, the activity will soon become bogged down, and its focus on fluency will be lost. Figures 3a and 3b show sample handouts for Student A and Student B. In these handouts, the questions are short and simple multiple-choice items with only two options. For example, in the Student A Handout (Figure 3a), the question asks whether the next paragraph will most likely be about (a) how Roosevelt tried to solve economic problems or (b) how Roosevelt became president. Because the last sentence of the previous paragraph emphasizes the severity of the economic crisis, a logical prediction would be that the next paragraph would discuss how Roosevelt tried to address the economic problems rather than how he became president.

The most important consideration in designing the materials for this activity (and others presented here) is that they provide an opportunity for students to read as quickly as possible while attending to the meaning of the passage. The reading skills that the teacher chooses to focus on (predicting, summarizing, etc.) and the specific information that students answer questions about are of less importance. If students are showing they understand the text, while reading it at a faster than normal speed—and hopefully enjoying themselves with their classmates—the activity will have achieved its goal.

CONCLUSION

The three activities outlined in this article have been designed to meet Nation's (2009) four conditions of fluency development. In all three activities, the focus is on processing different types of meaning, from main ideas in *Start-up!* to specific information in *Pop-up!* and connections among ideas in *End-up!* The requirement that pairs compete against other pairs to finish reading the passage and answering questions correctly first addresses the *pressure to perform faster* condition for fluency development. The condition that *all language is familiar* to students is met by having students reread passages already

Student A Handout

End-up! Reading-Fluency Race

With a partner, you will compete against another pair to be the first to finish reading a passage and answering questions about it. Before you begin, make sure you understand the correct answers to the questions below.

Your partner will read the following paragraph aloud. When he or she finishes reading, say, "End up!" and ask the question at the end of the paragraph. When your partner answers correctly, switch roles with your partner for the next paragraph.

[Read along silently]: In March 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became the 32nd president of the United States. In his first speech as president, he famously said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." At the time, stock markets had hit record lows, and banks were failing. Nearly 25% of Americans were unemployed, and many were homeless. It was the height of the Great Depression.

The next paragraph will most likely be about …
a) … how FDR tried to solve economic problems.
b) … how FDR became president.

Read the following paragraph aloud. When you are finished reading it, your partner will say, "End up!" and ask you a question.

[Read aloud]: Throughout the decade, FDR implemented important new economic reforms. Their purpose was to help the country recover from the economic crisis and to prevent future crises from occurring. This collection of bold new programs was known as the New Deal, and it had a major impact, not only on the U.S. economy of the 1930s, but on the direction of the country.

Figure 3a. *End-up!* Student A sample handout

studied in class. Finally, by providing frequent opportunities for practice using these and other fluency-based activities, teachers can ensure that the fourth fluency condition, *a large amount of input*, is also met.

These activities have a number of pedagogical benefits. First, they are all designed to be interactive and lively, providing for stimulating and potentially engaging reading practice. Second, no additional materials, aside from handouts prepared by the teacher, are needed. Third, the series of activities offers options for practicing a range of key reading abilities (identifying main ideas, finding details, and predicting/inferencing). Fourth, the activities necessitate cooperation among learners. Students do not compete individually to "beat" other students; they work together with others toward a shared goal—to finish reading the passage and answering questions correctly before other pairs do. Thus, in the parlance of cooperative-learning pedagogies, the activities are structured to include "positive interdependence" (Kagan 1994). It is hoped that these activities will make the "forgotten skill" of reading-fluency practice more enjoyable for learners and less "forgettable" for teachers.

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Student B Handout

End-up! Reading-Fluency Race

With a partner, you will compete against another pair to be the first to finish reading a passage and answering questions about it. Before you begin, make sure you understand the correct answers to the questions below.

Read the following paragraph aloud. When you are finished reading it, your partner will say, "End up!" and ask you a question.

[Read aloud]: In March 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became the 32nd president of the United States. In his first speech as president, he famously said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." At the time, stock markets had hit record lows, and banks were failing. Nearly 25% of Americans were unemployed, and many were homeless. It was the height of the Great Depression.

Your partner will read the following paragraph aloud. When he or she finishes reading, say, "End up!" and ask the question at the end of the paragraph. When your partner answers correctly, switch roles with your partner for the next paragraph.

[Read along silently]: Throughout the decade, FDR implemented important new economic reforms. Their purpose was to help the country recover from the economic crisis and to prevent future crises from occurring. This collection of bold new programs was known as the New Deal, and it had a major impact, not only on the U.S. economy of the 1930s, but on the direction of the country.

The next paragraph will most likely be about …
a) … why it was called the New Deal.
b) … the effects of the New Deal.

Figure 3b. *End-up!* Student B sample handout

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