Developing Fluency through Oral Reading

by ETHAN M. LYNN

Since becoming a TESOL professional, I have had a strong interest in reading. In Grabe and Stoller's (2011) book geared toward teachers, I came across two intriguing studies. One study found that word-level, sentence-level, and passage-level fluency were strongly predictive of reading comprehension (Klauda and Guthrie 2008). The other study found that students who engaged in oral repeated readings coupled with extensive reading significantly improved their reading abilities when compared to peers who did not engage in those activities (Kuhn et al. 2006). With these two studies fresh in my mind, I applied them to my teaching context: novice to intermediate students in an intensive English program.

I developed three sets of oral reading activities, which are described below. Each set focuses on one of the three types of fluency: word-, sentence-, and passage-level. The word-level fluency activities are best employed as part of the pre-reading phase of a reading activity. The sentence- and passage-level fluency activities are best done in the post-reading phase—that is, after students have read the text multiple times and after comprehension questions have been answered and reviewed. The entire text or sections of the text can be used for the activities, depending on text length and students' reading speed. The activities are meant to be repeated three to five times, with the students' engagement and motivation as a barometer.

I have found it helpful to occasionally change student groupings and pairings before subsequent repetitions of the activity. While most of the activities involve students competing against one another to read the fastest, the activities can be modified to engage slower-reading students, those intimidated by competition, and introverted students. Therefore, in addition to asking students to compete to be the fastest, I encourage students to compete against themselves by having them time each iteration with the hopes of reading faster on subsequent attempts. Finally, because this is a fluency activity, I do not explicitly emphasize accuracy.

These activities can be used with English learners at nearly any language level and typically require five to 15 minutes of class time. Materials needed are a reading text for each student—a text already used for classroom instruction is strongly recommended—and, for some of the activities, an audio recording of the text with the means to play it or a teacher to read the text aloud. A timing device might also be needed.

The main goals are to promote oral reading fluency and to engage and motivate students with productive, game-like activities.

The procedures for the activities at each level follow. These activities are meant to be discrete and stand-alone—not steps to be followed in order. Thus, teachers are free to pick and choose which ones they will employ.

WORD-LEVEL FLUENCY

1. Put students into pairs or groups of three. Students in each partnership alternate reading one word at a time out loud. Each partnership or group competes to finish before the others.

2. Students work alone or in pairs. If alone, students read the passage

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backwards and out loud while trying to be the first to finish. If in pairs, students alternate reading the passage backwards, one word at a time and out loud, with the goal of finishing before the other pairs.

SENTENCE-LEVEL FLUENCY

1. Put students into pairs or groups of three. Students in each partnership alternate reading one sentence at a time out loud. Each partnership or group competes to finish before the others.

2. Read the text out loud or play an audio recording of the text. Pause after each sentence. Students read the previous sentence out loud chorally. Continue until the end of the passage.

PASSAGE-LEVEL FLUENCY

1. Students individually read the entire passage out loud with the goal of being the first to finish.

2. Students individually time themselves reading the entire passage out loud and record their time. They repeat this with the goal of reading faster on subsequent attempts.

3. Students individually read out loud as much of the text as possible in a given amount of time. After time expires, they mark the last word they read. Then, with the same time limit, students repeat the activity from the beginning of the passage with the goal of reading more on subsequent attempts (see Anderson 1999).

4. Read the text out loud or play an audio recording of the text. Students chorally read out loud and in synchronization with the teacher or recording. On subsequent iterations, the pace of the teacher or recording can be increased (I recommend VLC media player for adjusting the pace of a recording; free downloads are available at www.videolan.org/vlc/). If students find the pacing too fast, they can read along silently.

To ensure that these activities provide maximum benefits for students and teachers, I want to emphasize a few final points:

• The sentence- and passage-level activities are best done in the post-reading phase. This means that students have read the passage multiple times (preferably three to five) and thoroughly analyzed answers to comprehension questions. In other words, these activities serve as a supplement to typical in-class reading instruction.

• While fluency is the focus, comprehension and accuracy should not be completely disregarded. If teachers want to include comprehension and accuracy, they can ask a follow-up comprehension question or two

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after each iteration and/or set a minimal standard for oral reading intelligibility. To ensure that intelligibility standards are met, teachers would do well to visit each group at least one time during the activity if possible.

- I have observed high levels of engagement and motivation even though students take turns reading in some activities. For example, students regularly follow along when it is not their turn because each turn is too short to permit temporary disengagement, and the competition motivates students to have the fastest transitions possible.

- These activities can occur directly after regular reading activities or a day or two later as a means to review previous material. If teachers wish to use these fluency activities as a review, asking comprehension questions after each iteration may be beneficial. A simple way to ask a follow-up comprehension question is to present the question orally or on the board in writing and ask each group to write the answer on a piece of paper after completing the reading. The teacher can then quickly verify answers by making a short visit to each group.

- The ideal group size is two, with groups of three used only when an odd number of students are in the class.

Overall, these fun, fast-paced activities serve as an engaging way to maximize reading instruction.

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