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Fast Track to Fluency: Volunteers Promoting Oral Reading Fluency in Struggling Readers



Abstract

Many elementary schools have volunteers who read with struggling readers, yet most have limited background knowledge on teaching reading or a framework to follow when working with students. This piece outlines “Fast Track to Fluency,” a method to ensure volunteer and students’ time is used efficiently in the classroom. Data from “Fast Track to Fluency” suggests that repeated readings—even with volunteers guiding the reading—have a strong correlation with increased fluency in struggling readers.

Keywords: upper elementary grades, struggling readers, volunteers, repeated reading, fluency

Introduction

Reading fluency, the ability to read with accuracy, speed, and prosody, plays an important role in becoming a good reader. “When words become instantly recognizable and a reader has sufficient fluency skills, processing resources can be focused on the message of the passage” (Pullen, Lane, & Monahan, 2004, p. 23).

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An effective method for increasing oral reading fluency is repeated reading. “Various studies have demonstrated that children at-risk for reading problems can benefit from programs implemented by volunteers, as long as volunteers are supervised and receive training” (Pullen, Lane, & Monaghan, 2004, p. 24).

The school where I teach has volunteers who read with struggling readers on a regular basis. Unfortunately, most volunteers do not have background knowledge on how to build fluency, teach comprehension, or foster other reading skills, and teachers do not have time to make lesson plans for the volunteer to implement. Many teachers send the student with a book to read with the volunteer. While this is beneficial, I feel that if a struggling reader is missing instruction, the volunteer should be implementing a strategy that is effective and worthy of being pulled out during class instruction. Based on this philosophy, I created Fast Track to Fluency. I will review my experience implementing the Fast Track program along with the responses I received from volunteers who participated this year. It is my hope that this information might help other teachers, volunteers, and parents to support their children’s literacy and lead the teachers and volunteers at my school to use the Fast Track program with their struggling readers.

Literature Review

Research tells us that “the ultimate goal of a fluent reader is to read at a normal speaking pace while comprehending what is being read” (Faver, 2008, p. 350). Yet, many readers struggle and lack fluency because they focus on the decoding of words and are learning-to-

- Sit side by side with the child as they read the passage aloud, and take a running record of their reading for one minute.

Behavior	Notation	Error or No Error
Correct Response	Do nothing	No error
Substitution	Circle the word. Write the spoken word above the word in the passage.	Error
Omission	Place a slash through the word left out.	Error
Insertion	Insert a carrot with the inserted word.	Error
Repetition	Draw a line under the word(s) that was repeated.	No error
Self Correction	Mark SC above the word.	No error
Ask for Help (provide reader with the word)	Slash word. Write a H above the word.	Error

- Help the student graph their words correct per minute in blue.
- Provide feedback to the reader.
 - You did a nice job _____ (reading not too fast or too slow, taking a short breath at each punctuation mark, reading like you sound like when you speak, using expression, changing your tone to reflect the meaning of the text ...).
 - Next time focus on _____ (reading not too fast or too slow, taking a short breath when you see a punctuation mark, reading like you sound like when you speak, using expression, changing your tone to reflect the meaning of the text ...).
 - Let's look over some vocabulary that was in the story (challenging words, interesting words, or chunking strategies).
- Read the passage to the student with appropriate rate and expression.
- Read the passage aloud together.
- Remind the student to read the passage to as many people as they can and to place a sticker on the graph (in their folder) for each read. Remind the student to read with expression.

Observations:

- Did the reader read with expression?
- Did the reader read at an engaging pace?
- Did the reader pause appropriately at punctuation?
- Did the reader notice when errors changed the meaning of the text?
- Did the reader attempt to sound out words, skip the word, or ask for help?

Figure 1. Fast Track to Fluency Guide.

read unlike good readers who are reading-to-learn (Musti-Rao, Hawkins, & Barkley, 2009). We need to provide struggling readers with explicit instruction to build accuracy, speed, and prosody while reading (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). One technique that continues to show promise in building reading fluency is the use of repeated reading.

Repeated reading is a research-validated approach where the reader rereads the same text for a certain amount of time or until a fluency criterion is met (Musti-Rao, Hawkins, & Barkley, 2009). Students should read passages on their instructional level several times in a five- to ten-minute span. To further develop fluency through repeated readings, a model reader should read the passage, provide feedback, and support the student after the student reads the passage.

After the passage is selected based on reading level or interest, the teacher assesses the student and sets a reading goal. A common way to set and assess a student's reading goal is by timing his or her oral reading for one minute and recording their words correct per minute (WCPM). Having students help set reading goals (Nes, 2003) and chart or graph his or her progress has shown great promise in increasing motivation (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). Using two different colors for cold and hot readings gives visual progress for the reader (Hasbrouck, Innot, & Rogers, 1999). Many school districts use AIMSweb Standard Reading Assessment Passages (RAPs), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Gray Oral Reading Test, Fourth Edition (GORT-4), National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Fluency

Scale, or Reading Fluency Monitor by Read Naturally to instruct and monitor fluency (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005).

Repeated reading is not only effective but is an inexpensive strategy for volunteers to use to develop fluency for struggling readers. Repeated reading has an easy-to-follow framework and requires little training for volunteers to implement accurately and effectively. I developed Fast Track to Fluency after researching other interventions such as Fluency Flyers (Conderman & Strobel, 2008) and The Poetry Academy (Wilfong, 2008). Fluency Flyers and The Poetry Academy use volunteers to help struggling or reluctant readers find success and motivate them to read with little preparation and pullout time from class instruction. The students interact with an expert reader and take ownership over their own learning through repeated readings after each session. The programs are also successful because they train and support the volunteers.

Methodology

Fast Track to Fluency was conducted in an exemplary rated elementary school in an urban public school district in Central Texas. The school has 390 students ranging from grades kindergarten through sixth grade. According to the Texas Education Agency's (2011-2012) Academic Excellence Indicator System, the campus is 71% Caucasian, 25% Hispanic, and 4% Other. Of this population, 8.5% are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

The study followed the work of twelve fourth-grade students, six girls and six boys, and four adult volunteers. The student participants were selected based on their scores on two district selected assessments, AIMSweb fluency curriculum-based measurement (CBM) and the MAZE assessment that assesses silent reading comprehension through word selection based on semantic and syntactic accuracy ("Cloze tasks," 2012). The students selected to participate in Fast Track to Fluency performed "below average" or "well below average" on one or both of the assessments. The volunteers were selected because of previous experience as volunteers working with struggling readers on the campus.

In this program, a volunteer meets with a student for 10 minutes once a week to focus on fluency. The volunteer has the student read the passage aloud as the volunteer assesses the student's WCPM, provides feedback to the reader based on his or her fluency, and helps the student graph his or her WCPM in blue. Next, the volunteer model-reads the passage, and then the child and the volunteer simultaneously read the passage aloud. Over the week, the student is responsible for rereading the passage and graphing each rereading. On the fifth day, the student rereads the passage to the teacher, who assesses the student's WCPM. The child graphs the WCPM in red, and the teacher and the student discuss the findings between the two readings and the rereading's graph from the week.

Figure 1 provides clear expectations of the program for the volunteers to follow when pulling struggling readers from classroom instruction. Directions for using Fast Track to Fluency are in the accompanying chart, as does the protocol expected of volunteers who helped with the project.

Prior to the collection of data, the teacher met with the volunteers for 15 minutes to train them on Fast Track to Fluency protocol. They were provided with a program guide to follow and went over how to assess a running record. The passages were selected from Reading A-Z website (www.readinga-z.com). Three expository passages—*A Visit to the Big Apple*; *Music, Food, and Fun*; and *Recycling Jars and Cans*—were selected for the repeated readings. They are designated at Level T, end of third grade. Before the program began, the teacher sat down with three student participants at a time to explain the process of Fast Track to Fluency. The teacher showed them their folders with their first reading passage and WCPM and rereads graph. The students completed the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990). Their full scale average percentile for having a positive attitude towards recreational and academic reading was 48 out of 100. Five of their surveys showed that students prefer recreational reading to academic reading. The other seven students prefer academic reading to recreational reading.

Findings

The researcher selected three student participants to focus on during the three week period: Greg, Jane, and Noah. (Data of all participants are available in Table 1.)

Greg, who receives special education services, increased 34 WCPM on his first hot reading, decreased 2 WCPM on his second hot reading, and increased 37 WCPM on his third hot reading. Greg's Elementary Reading Attitude Survey scored in the 11 percentile out of 100. Greg reread the first two passages once over the week and the third passage three times. The volunteer shared that after the first reading, he did not comprehend what he read but after the model

Table 1
Student Data for Various Assessments

	CBM Grade Level Mean 134	MAZE Grade Level Mean 17
Noah	97	14
Greg	109	9
Edgar	128	14
Jane	65	13
Izzy	101	15
Katherine	101	13
Sarah	110	17
Doug	120	14
Julie	146	14
Evelyn	145	13
Nick	145	11
Luc	108	11

	Cold Reading	Hot Reading	Progress	Rereads
Noah	82	84	+2	2
Greg	92	126	+34	1
Edgar	127	171	+44	0
Jane	55	89	+34	0
Izzy	88	155	+67	3
Katherine	107	115	+8	0
Sarah	90	109	+19	3
Doug	126	159	+33	0
Julie	99	107	+8	4
Evelyn	134	178	+44	3
Nick	126	168	+42	0
Luc	96	100	+4	1

Passage 1: *A Visit to the Big Apple*
Growth Overall: An average of 28 WCPM

	Cold Reading	Hot Reading	Progress	Rereads
Noah	82	85	+3	0
Greg	110	107	-3	1
Edgar	138	165	+27	0
Jane	58	101	+43	0
Izzy	114	125	+11	2
Katherine	102	132	+30	1
Sarah	89	111	+22	1
Doug	118	201	+83	10
Julie	115	197	+82	4
Evelyn	148	159	+11	1
Nick	137	Absent	Absent	Absent
Luc	87	102	+15	1

Passage 2: *Music, Food, and Fun*
Growth Overall: An average of 29 WCPM

	Cold Reading	Hot Reading	Progress	Rereads
Noah	88	76	-12	0
Greg	97	134	+37	3
Edgar	115	187	+72	5
Jane	66	90	+24	1
Izzy	111	144	+33	4
Katherine	115	126	+11	2
Sarah	91	135	+44	3
Doug	134	171	+37	0
Julie	131	142	+11	1
Evelyn	124	171	+47	0
Nick	112	166	+54	2
Luc	110	125	+15	1

Passage 3: *Recycling Jars and Cans*
Growth Overall: An average of 32 WCPM

The data show that repeated readings have a strong correlation with increasing fluency in struggling readers, which supports other researchers' findings. Providing direct fluency instruction, modeling fluent reading, and interacting with the reader during repeated reading are good techniques to build fluency in struggling readers.

read and choral read, he understood more of the passage. Usually, Greg asked questions or commented about the passages he read with the volunteer.

Jane, who is diagnosed with dyslexia, increased 34 WCPM on her first hot reading, 43 WCPM on her second hot reading, and 24 WCPM on her third hot reading. After meeting with the volunteer, Jane did not reread any of the passages, except that she read the third passage once over the week. Her Elementary Reading Attitude Survey scored in the 41 percentile out of 100, which is one of the highest of the student participants. Jane was excited to read with the volunteer and with the teacher, and she is not aware that she reads slower than other students in her class. The volunteer observed that "she absolutely seemed interested in working harder to improve her skills." The volunteer was impressed with the progress that Jane made and asked if Jane could continue to meet with her once a week to continue the program. The teacher was ecstatic, and Jane chose to continue the program with the volunteer.

Noah, who regularly meets with the reading specialist, did not show growth through repeated readings. On his first hot reading, he improved 2 WCPM, on his second hot reading he improved 3 WCPM, and on his third hot reading he decreased 12 WCPM. He reread the first passage twice and did not reread the second or third passage over the week. The volunteer talked with him about who he might read to during the week, and he expressed a number of reasons why he couldn't read to others (e.g., Mom is busy; Dad works; my brother is not interested).

Noah's Elementary Reading Attitude Survey scored in the 1 percentile out of 100. The volunteer noticed that he "seemed reserved both at the beginning and during each session. He did not seem interested in the task but did what was expected. He seemed distracted when I read to him and was hardly audible when we read together." Noah decided not to continue meeting with the volunteer after the research stopped.

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reading are good techniques to build fluency in struggling readers. Modeling how to read the passage demonstrates good reading and identifies any difficult words the student may not know (Nes, 2003). Providing feedback and support helps drive the reader in the right direction.

Students must be actively engaged in the process for repeated reading to be beneficial, which was supported with Jane’s and Greg’s fluency growth. “The program’s effectiveness depends primarily on the student’s willingness to practice the passage throughout the week. If everybody does their part, the program seems very effective,” a volunteer noted.

Repeated Reading Builds Fluency

Providing direct fluency instruction, like Fast Track to Fluency, allows the student to learn the procedures of the program and what is being asked of them. Repeating the same procedures each week builds routine and comfort in the activities. It also provides the volunteer with a guideline to follow, ensuring that best practices are being used while providing a reading intervention for struggling readers. The data show that the majority of students’ WCPM on the cold reading increased each week as did their fluency after repeated readings.

Modeling fluent reading demonstrates good reading and identifies any difficult words the student may have trouble with (Nes, 2003). The student first follows along as the volunteer reads the passage, and then the student and the volunteer read the passage simultaneously allowing the student to follow or be directed to the appropriate rate and prosody of a good reader. The teacher and volunteers noticed that some students read in a rhythmic manner while others sounded more robotic or could barely be heard. During the hot readings, the teacher noted that a few students were more focused on speed than prosody, ignoring punctuation in the passage.

Interacting with the Reader Promotes Fluency

A volunteer noticed that the students were excited when the volunteer pointed out positive things they did while they read aloud using the feedback comments from the Fast Track to Fluency Guide. A volunteer also thought the students “seemed to listen a little to the suggestions for improvement.”

During the hot readings, the teacher observed the students accurately read words they had misread during their cold readings. The teacher also noticed that they would stumble over these words at times but then corrected themselves.

Readers who are not fluent have a harder time comprehending and have a higher chance of losing interest in school.

Students’ Fluency Increased with Minimal Exposures to the Same Text

The data show that the majority of the student participants made gains in their fluency after repeated readings with volunteers. On average, students WCPM increased 30 words between cold and hot readings. Between the cold and hot readings, the students heard the passage read to them, read the passage with the model reader, and were encouraged to reread the passage during the week. The data show that the majority of the students did not reread the passage at all or only a few times between cold and hot readings. (These data are available in Table 2.) With minimal exposure to the same text, fluency gains were made.

Volunteers Are an Effective Resource

Fast Track to Fluency was effective because the teacher trained and supported the volunteers on how to administer the program. The volunteers learned how to conduct a running record and went over the three steps to the program: cold read, model read, and choral read. The volunteers had a framework to follow, Fast Track

Table 2
Independent Repeated Readings Data

Passage	Independent Repeated Readings
Passage 1: <i>A Visit to the Big Apple</i>	5 students reread the passage - 0 times 2 students reread the passage - 1 time 1 student reread the passage - 2 times 3 students reread the passage - 3 times 1 student reread the passage - 4 times
Passage 2: <i>Music, Food, and Fun</i>	3 students reread the passage - 0 times 5 students reread the passage - 1 time 1 student reread the passage - 2 times 1 student reread the passage - 4 times 1 student reread the passage - 10 times 1 student was absent
Passage 3: <i>Recycling Jars and Cans</i>	3 students reread the passage - 0 times 3 students reread the passage - 1 time 2 students reread the passage - 2 times 2 students reread the passage - 3 times 1 students reread the passage - 4 times 1 student reread the passage - 5 times

to Fluency Guide, which provided empowerment and direction for implementing repeated readings. The framework supported the volunteers with a list of steps to follow and meaningful questions or feedback for them to have at hand (Al-Hazza & Gupta, 2006). One volunteer was unsure if other volunteers would like the program because it required taking notes, offering feedback, and administering running records, even though the expectations were clear and easy to follow. The current volunteer program at the school allows volunteers to “basically sit and listen to a child read,” the volunteer added.

Conclusion

As students enter upper elementary school, fluency plays a defining role in their academic and intellectual growth. Part of the reason for this is that students are “exposed to higher level reading materials” (Musti-Rao, Hawkins, & Barkley, 2009, p.12) and must build their word recognition, automaticity, and prosody to understand the meaning of the text. “Although reading fluently is not the sole purpose of reading, higher order reading and comprehension cannot be developed without a strong foundation of accurate and efficient word recognition” (Musti-Rao, Hawkins, & Barkley, 2009, p. 21). Readers who are not fluent have a harder time comprehending and have a higher chance of losing interest in school. It’s important for teachers to allocate 10 minutes during their reading program for modeling fluent reading, repeated readings, and monitoring students’ progress. Teachers need to provide time for explicit instruction on repeated reading not only to build fluency, but also to improve the students’ overall learning success.

Fast Track to Fluency is a quick, inexpensive, and effective strategy to promote fluency. Whether a volunteer is working with a kindergartener or a sixth grader, repeated reading will benefit each reader. Fast Track to Fluency also provides volunteers with background knowledge and an easy plan to follow to help implement repeated readings. Older students can also administer the program to younger students or parents can use the program to set goals, work with their children, and monitor progress at home.

Whether your school has volunteers on your campus or not, struggling readers need direct fluency instruction where they are paired with an expert reader and receive feedback on their reading. “Using the strategies of repeated reading, listening-while-reading, and assisted reading” increases students fluency (Wilfong, 2008, p. 9). Fluency is a lifelong skill that is needed to be successful in today’s society.

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