Five Oral Reading Fluency Strategies for Supporting Struggling Adolescent Readers

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Abstract

By the time students enter the fourth grade, it is expected that they possess the basic literacy skills needed to read and learn content. It is the general belief that in the early grades, students are taught foundational literacy skills that make them proficient readers by the time they become adolescent learners. For many, this assumption is true. However, for a large majority of students between Grades 4 and 12, basic literacy skills are not in place, leading them to struggle to acquire information. Oral reading fluency, one of the basic literacy skills that adolescents must possess, can be explicitly taught beyond the early years. In this article, the author discusses who are struggling adolescent readers, what is oral reading fluency and why it is significant for this group, and how five specific strategies can be used with this population.

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When students enter the fourth grade, they are considered to be adolescent learners (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). This occurs because fourth grade signifies the point at which students transition from learning to read to using reading to acquire content knowledge (Chall, 1983). Large numbers of students in Grades 4–12 are lacking foundational reading skills, which causes them to be two or more years below grade level. These students are categorized as adolescent struggling readers (Torgesen, 2005). According to the 2015 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, 31% of fourth-grade students and 24% of eighth-grade students scored below the basic level in overall reading skills, and 33% of fourth-grade students and 42% of fourth-grade students scored at the basic level. Collectively, almost two-thirds of fourth- and eighth-grade students are at or below grade level in their overall reading performance.

Students at this age struggle for a variety of reasons, and one cause is a lack of adequately developed word level reading proficiency. In this case, students are unable to fluently decode words to allow them to read with ease (Hock et al., 2009). One of the reasons why this occurs is because some students have not fully internalized the alphabetic code. That is, they have deficits in their ability to automatically interact with the written symbols on the page to meaningfully read connected text (Moats, 2001). This deficit occurs because of a lack of explicit instruction in word identification techniques and/or the innate challenges that some students possess (Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009; Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2008). Reading thus becomes a laborious, dreaded, and unsatisfying experience, with many of these students giving up and dropping out of school simply because what is being asked of them is more than they can do (Hernandez, 2011).

ORAL READING FLUENCY

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000), in its Report of the National Reading Panel, identified reading fluency as one of the five critical components necessary for proficient reading. Oral reading fluency refers to the ability to read quickly and accurately, with smoothness, phrasing, and expression (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008; Rasinski, 2003). It is of particular significance to adolescent struggling readers because the emphasis on developing fluent reading often occurs during the earlier years when students are learning to read. The assumption is often made that by the time students enter the fourth grade, this foundational skill is in place and teaching fluent reading is no longer a priority (Joseph & Schisler, 2009). However, this assumption does not hold true for many adolescent struggling readers who have not mastered foundational reading skills (Sedita, 2011). For students to improve their fluency skills, they must continue to receive explicit instruction in oral reading fluency (Rasinski et al., 2005). Dudley and Mather (2005) provided the AIMSweb measures that indicate where students should be reading at specific grade levels. By the end of elementary school (fifth grade), students performing at the 50th percentile should be reading approximately 140 words correct per minute (wcpm), and this number increases to 156 wcpm by the end of

the eighth grade. These numbers support the idea that in order for students to continue to progress in their reading development, they must be explicitly taught and must receive opportunities to practice their reading. This is especially crucial for adolescent struggling readers.

Accurate and fast reading of connected text has been shown to increase reading comprehension. This kind of reading supports working memory as it processes large chunks of text (Chard, Pikulski, & McDonagh, 2006). As adolescent learners move through the grades, the academic demands that they are expected to meet increase. During these years, older students are required to read new and dense material, make connections across concepts, interpret ideas, and solve abstract problems (Wehby & Falk, 2016). To be successful, they must actively keep track of super and subordinate ideas, follow the authors' line of thinking, monitor their own understanding, and realize when a breakdown in comprehension occurs (Garnett, 2011). All of these literacy skills require students to focus on the task of processing the information with which they are interacting. If they struggle to read text quickly and accurately, they will not be able to attend to the content as their focus will be on identifying the words on the page. According to LaBerge and Samuels (1974), students need automatic word recognition if their attention and processing skills are to be devoted to the comprehension of text.

According to Joseph and Schisler (2009), little direction is provided to teachers of adolescent learners about how to use effective instructional tools to develop the basic reading skills of struggling adolescent readers. However, there are several research-based recommendations for how to provide reading instruction to build oral reading fluency to support this group's reading development. These strategies can assist struggling adolescent readers in achieving proficiency in the areas of reading rate, word

recognition, and prosody, which ultimately helps to improve comprehension.

ORAL READING FLUENCY STRATEGIES
Read Non-controlled Decodable Texts

What is this strategy? Non-controlled decodable texts are texts that students can read with at least 95% accuracy (Wilson, 2011). These books make use of highly decodable basic phonetic patterns and sounds that make them manageable for older struggling readers. While non-controlled means that students have not explicitly learned all of the patterns that are presented in the text, because of its high emphasis on the use of decodable words, students are able to apply both context clues and sounding out procedures to determine unfamiliar words. High interest-low level readers are one kind of non-controlled decodable text that is appropriate for this population. As the name indicates, these books are highly relevant to adolescent readers as their content and appearance are age appropriate. However, they are written at lower reading levels that provide support to struggling readers. High interest-low level readers can be found at the following websites:

[High Noon Books](#)

[High Interest Publishing (HIP) Books](#)

[Orca Book Publishers](#)

[Remedia Publications](#)

[Start-to-Finish Library](#)

[Wieser Educational](#)

Why does it support adolescent struggling readers? Non-controlled decodable texts benefit adolescent struggling readers because they provide students with the opportunity to meaningfully engage with text at their reading levels. In order for students to become better readers, they must have lots of practice reading

books at their independent reading levels (at least 95% accuracy), and non-controlled texts provide this opportunity (Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011). These books are motivational as students are able to read topics which interest them, and, most importantly, students can feel proud of the materials that they read as these books look developmentally appropriate.

When can teachers use these materials? The structure of the classroom day lends itself to numerous opportunities for teachers to incorporate non-controlled decodable texts into instruction. Three such instances are during small group guided instruction, small group practice opportunities, and independent reading time. During small group guided instruction, the teacher can use one or more non-controlled decodable texts to pre-teach a specific concept that is going to be taught more in-depth during a future whole group lesson. During this time, struggling adolescent readers can have the opportunity to successfully read words and discuss ideas that are related to the concept being introduced. This will provide students with the background knowledge that they will need to participate during whole group instruction. During small group practice, the teacher can create classroom stations where non-controlled decodable texts are included. These books can be used by students to further explore a topic that has been previously introduced. Independent reading time, also known as Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) or Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) time, provides additional opportunities for students to leisurely read these books for enjoyment.

Practice Reader's Theater with a Twist

What is this strategy? Reader's theater, in its traditional form, is a style of performance where students are given a script and are assigned a specific character. They typically receive the script at the beginning of the week and practice their designated part(s) multiple times until they are able to read it fluently. On the day of the performance, students stand in front of an audience and read their lines. Instead of using costumes, props, or other visuals, the readers must effectively communicate the story's message through their vocal expressions (Doherty & Coggeshall, 2005). The twist comes about in how students are expected to practice reading the script. Instead of being assigned a specific character, the students must practice reading the entire script in order to prepare for the performance. On performance day, students read the lines sequentially. That is, each reader delivers a line; for example, reader one reads line one, reader two reads line two, and so forth down the row of readers. This pattern repeats until the entire script is read (Garnett, 2011).

Teachers can create their own scripts or use ones that are commercially prepared. A few websites that provide scripts specifically targeted for adolescent readers include the following:

[Hot Topics in Adolescent Literacy](#)

[Free Scripts Catalog](#)

[Scholastic](#)

Why does it support adolescent struggling readers? Because adolescent struggling readers are two or more years below grade level, teachers must teach with a sense of urgency (Routman, 2003). Teachers must realize that these students have a lot of ground to make up in a short period of time, and, therefore, they must make deliberate efforts to maximize the amount of time that students are actively engaged in learning. Instead of reading small sections of a script, reader's theater with a twist allows students to engage with the entire script, providing optimum repeated reading practice. This allows students to read more text across multiple opportunities. Repeated reading strengthens students' word recognition and enhances their comprehension (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2010). Practicing an entire script, as opposed to just reading the lines of one

character, also allows students to develop their ability to read with expression as they must sound like each character that they read.

When can students practice scripts? Students can practice their scripts at multiple points throughout the day. As a segment of the English language arts block, students can work in collaborative groups to practice their scripts together. When they complete their assignment(s) in a timely manner and are waiting for the next lesson to begin or are waiting for instructions from the teacher, they can pull out their scripts and read independently. During transitional times, such as when students are waiting to go to lunch or waiting for the dismissal bell to ring, they can review their scripts. Students can also read their scripts as a part of their homework assignment.

Incorporate Morphological Word Work

What is this strategy? Morphological word work occurs when teachers explicitly and systematically teach students about the structure of the English language. This explicit and systematic instruction entails teacher modeling and guided practice, followed by independent student learning experiences (Hennessy, 2011). When teachers teach word structure, they focus on the parts of words and how those parts come together to provide meaning. Examples of word structure include prefixes and suffixes (affixes), and Greek and Latin parts. White, Sowell, and Yanaghihara (1989) have identified 20 of the most commonly occurring prefixes and suffixes in the English language (see Appendix A), and Carreker (2011) has identified 10 commonly occurring Latin and Greek roots (see Appendix B).

Why does it support adolescent struggling readers? In order to learn in their content area subjects, struggling adolescent readers may be required to interact with challenging content area texts. Learning about word structure helps them to shift their focus from individual sounds to word parts that provide meaning

(Wilson, 2011). As students read and encounter unfamiliar words, they can break them into parts based on their morphemes to predict the meaning. Word structure knowledge also supports students' decoding and spelling skills. When students see multisyllabic words that they must read (decode), they can look at the individual chunks of words and put those chunks together to say the entire word (McCutchen, Green, Abbott, & Sanders, 2009). To aid in spelling, when students hear words that they must write, they can think about the structural pattern(s) that correspond with the sounds that they hear before they write the word (Goodwin & Ahn, 2010). Knowing the meanings of words and being able to decode unfamiliar words are particularly useful in supporting fluency because when struggling adolescent readers understand the characteristics of words and how they work, they will be able to quickly and efficiently determine new words as they read (Reed, 2008). Further, Nagy and Townsend (2012) stated that "because academic language is characterized by large numbers of morphologically complex words, recognizing the morphological structure of longer words is an important aspect of fluency development" (p. 102). In a 2006 study conducted by Nagy, Berninger, and Abbott, these researchers found that morphological awareness significantly impacted the rate and accuracy with which eighth- and ninth-grade students were able to decode morphologically complex words.

What can morphology work look like? Teachers can search the web to find ideas for building students' morphological skills. Here are a few examples of websites that support the development of morphology skills in struggling adolescent readers:

LD Online

Reading Rockets

Morphological Awareness | Dyslexia Help at the University of Michigan

International Literacy Association Hub—Wiley Online Library

The Common Core, English Learners, and Morphology 101—Unpacking LS.4 for ELLs

Model Fluent Reading

What is this strategy? In the early grades, reading aloud to students is a common practice. However, as students move into the middle and secondary levels, teacher read alouds occur less frequently (Giorgis, 1999). When teachers model fluent reading, they conduct regular read alouds that allow them to demonstrate how proficient readers read fiction and nonfiction text (Albright, 2002). Teachers are able to model quick, accurate, smooth, and expressive reading, all qualities of fluency. Students witness effective reading practices and are provided with a standard for which to strive. During this experience, the teacher thinks aloud about the text's content so that students can realize that active thinking takes place during reading (Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007). The teacher also engages students through questioning and discussion to ensure that they make meaning as they listen (Guerard, 2007).

Why does it support adolescent struggling readers? Modeling fluent reading is especially important for adolescent struggling readers because it is often assumed that by the time students get to the fourth grade, they know how to effectively read and interact with text (Roberts, Torgesen, Boardman, & Scammacca, 2008). However, for readers who struggle due to lack of explicit instruction in this area or who have inborn challenges, these skills may not be fully developed, and, thus, they need to participate in read aloud activities to learn how to read fluently (Guerard, 2007). In addition to modeling fluent reading, teachers can develop students' vocabularies and expose them to informational and story text structure, further helping them to understand how text works (Lane

& Wright, 2007). Most importantly, teachers can demonstrate a passion for and excitement about reading, which can help struggling readers to see that reading is an enjoyable experience (Moss, 1991). This enjoyment can motivate them to read more frequently, which strengthens their fluency skills (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

When can teachers model fluent reading? There are many times throughout the school day that teachers can model fluent reading. For 5–10 minutes at the beginning of the class period, teachers can read aloud a chapter from a novel to settle the students and awaken their minds. To introduce the entire class to a new concept that is about to be taught, teachers can read aloud a piece of narrative or expository text to provide necessary background knowledge. During small group instruction, teachers can read aloud the content area textbook to support struggling readers who may not be able to read the text on their own. For 5–10 minutes at the end of class, teachers can read aloud an informational text to pull together the big ideas from the lesson. There are novels, picture books, and informational texts that are available for content area teachers to use in their classrooms. Ming and Mader (2016) provided a list of twelve websites that teachers of adolescent students can use to find such books. These are listed below:

Artbook

Children's Book Council

Goodreads

Junior Library Guild

Macmillan Publishers

National Council for the Social Studies

National Public Radio Books

National Science Teachers Association

North Atlantic Books

Random House for High School Teachers

Scholastic

Young Adult Library Services Association

Chart Reading Progress

What is this strategy? The charting of reading progress occurs when students regularly monitor their reading improvement through timed practice which is tracked using a graphical source. Students engage in the "cold" reading of a piece of text as their partners time them and then graph the number of words read correctly during that time period. This initial graphing provides baseline data for later comparison. Calculating the number of words read correctly per minute is as follows:

Number of correctly read words equals number of words in the text minus the number of incorrectly read words.

Multiply the number of correctly read words in the text times 60 and divide that number by the number of seconds it took the student to read the text.

Example: Text has 100 words, student has five incorrectly read words, and it took 70 seconds to read (95 words x 60 seconds)/70 seconds = 81 words correct per minute (wcpm).

Following the cold reading, students practice reading the same piece of text multiple times. The number of times that the text is practiced could be determined by student-teacher agreement, or it could be left up to the student's discretion. After the practice period, students read the text a final time to their partners who again time them and graph the words read correctly. Students then compare their performance from the first to the final reading to determine how

much improvement has been made (Therrien & Kubina, 2006). Appendix C includes an example of a graph that students can use to chart their reading progress.

Why does it support adolescent struggling readers? Many adolescent struggling readers have a history of reading failure, and, as a result, do not believe in their abilities to succeed (Biggs, Homan, Dedrick, Minick, & Rasinski, 2008). When they chart their reading progress and realize that they can improve their skills with deliberate effort, this may serve as a motivational tool for them to continuously practice (Wexler, Vaughn, Roberts, & Denton, 2010). In addition to being motivational, regularly charting reading progress strengthens students' reading speed and accuracy as the principle of "practice makes perfect" takes effect (Musti-Rao, Hawkins, & Barkley, 2009). As students repeatedly read and chart their progress, this can help to improve their sight word vocabulary as many high frequency words appear from text to text (Roberts et al., 2008).

What kinds of texts can be charted? There are several kinds of texts that students read that can be charted. Reader's theater scripts, as mentioned above, lend themselves to being charted as students read them repeatedly as they prepare for their performance. Students can also read their non-decodable texts multiple times throughout the day as they work to process content. Teachers can also provide students with 100-word passage excerpts, targeted for their reading levels, that they can read independently or to a partner.

CONCLUSION

To successfully navigate the learning environment, adolescent learners must possess foundational literacy skills, one of them being oral reading fluency. Having strong oral reading fluency is critically important to this group as the academic demands that they must meet become more challenging as they move through the grade levels. While oral reading

fluency is emphasized when young children are learning to read, these skills can be explicitly taught to adolescent struggling readers who do not have this foundational skill in place. Oral reading fluency can be integrated into the daily instructional routine through a variety of individual, small group, and whole group activities. The five strategies discussed above are offered as a way to provide teachers with ideas for how to help adolescent struggling readers improve their oral reading fluency skills as these skills are essential to content area learning.

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Appendix A

Common Prefixes and Suffixes

Common Prefixes			Common Suffixes		
Prefix	**Meaning**	**Example Word**	**Suffix**	**Meaning**	**Example Word**
anti-	against	antidote	-able, -ible	can be done	reasonable
de-	down	debase	-al, -ial	characterized by	personal
dis-	not	distrust	-ed	past tense verbs	tipped
en-, em-	cause to	enable	-en	made of	golden
fore-	before	forefather	-er	comparative	bigger
in-, im-	not	impossible	-er, -or	one who	singer
il-	not	illogical	-est	comparative	largest
inter-	between	interstate	-ful	full of	helpful
mid-	middle	midsection	-ic	having qualities or characteristics of	futuristic
mis-	wrongly	misunderstand	-ing	present participle	sweeping
non-	not	nonsense	-ion, -tion, -ation, -ition	action, process, or state	supervision, commendation, delegation, contrition
over-	over	overindulge	-ity, -ty	state of	propensity
pre-	before	preheat	-ive, -ative, -itive	pertaining to, tending to	detective
re-	again	regenerate	-less	without	selfless
semi-	half	semiannual	-ly	characteristic of	anxiously
sub-	below	submerge	-ment	action or process	excitement
super-	above	superordinate	-ness	condition of, state of	cleanliness
trans-	across	transcontinental	-ous, -eous, -ious	having the qualities of	gregarious
un-	not	unruly	-s, -es	plural	containers
under-	under	underestimate	-y	characterized by	heavy

Appendix B

Common Latin and Greek Roots

Common Latin Roots			Common Greek Roots		
Root	**Meaning**	**Example Word**	**Root**	**Meaning**	**Example Word**
audi	to hear	auditory	auto	self	autograph
dict	to say	dictate	bio	life	biology
ject	to throw	reject	graph	write	graphic
port	to carry	transport	hydro	water	hydrant
rupt	to break	rupture	meter	measure	speedometer
scrib	to write	scribe	ology	study of	theology
spect	to watch	spectator	photo	light	photosynthesis
struct	to build	structure	scope	view	telescope
tract	to pull	tractor	tele	distance	telephone
vis	to see	vision	therm	heat	thermostat

Appendix C

Oral Reading Fluency Graph

Student Name: _____

150																	
145																	
140																	
135																	
130																	
125																	
120																	
115																	
110																	
105																	
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40																	
35																	
30																	
25																	
20																	
15																	
10																	
5																	
0																	
WCPM	M	T	W	R	F		M	T	W	R	F		M	T	W	R	F
	Week of:						Week of:						Week of:				
	Text						Text						Text				