

# WHY READING FLUENCY SHOULD BE HOT!

*Timothy V. Rasinski*

In 2009, an annual survey of experts (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2010) in reading determined that reading fluency was no longer a hot topic for reading. Moreover, those same experts determined that fluency should also not be considered a hot topic. The 2010 survey reports the same results (Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2011). How could this be?

The National Reading Panel's (NRP; 2000) survey of research in reading determined that reading fluency was, indeed, one of the pillars of effective reading instruction. Subsequent summaries of reading research have also determined that there is a solid body of research that supports reading fluency instruction (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Rasinski, 2010; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). In this article, I explore why fluency has become such a pariah in the reading field, and I also discuss why it should be a central element to any effective fluency curriculum and how this can happen.

## **Why Fluency Is Not Hot**

There are several reasons why fluency has lost its allure among reading educators and experts. The first problem lies in the way that fluency is generally measured. Reading rate (the number of words a reader can read on grade level text in a minute) has come to be the quintessential measure of reading fluency. This comes from studies that have shown high correlations between reading rate and reading comprehension. This correlational research has evolved into a definition of reading fluency as reading fast. As a result, reading fluency instruction has become in many classrooms a quest for speed. Students are provided with instruction that emphasizes increasing reading rate.

If fluency is nothing more than reading fast, then fluency instruction should be considered cold. In its

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fullest and most authentic sense, fluency is reading with and for meaning, and any instruction that focuses primarily on speed with minimal regard for meaning is wrong.

A second reason for fluency's demotion is that it is associated primarily with oral reading (NRP, 2000), and because most of the reading that is done beyond the primary grades is silent reading, then oral reading fluency instruction must have little value. Why teach oral reading fluency if students will rarely employ it beyond grades 2 or 3? Indeed, Chall's (1996) model of reading development places fluency as a competency to be mastered in the early stages of reading. Why bother, then, with fluency beyond grades 2 or 3?

Third, as one of the five pillars of effective reading instruction (NRP, 2000), fluency is often taught as a separate area of the reading curriculum, distinct and apart from authentic reading students do during guided reading or reading workshop—a time when the teacher's stopwatch comes out and students read orally for speed. In many classrooms today, students are being asked to reread a reading passage from the core reading series or a fluency program four, five, even six times until they can read it at a speed deemed appropriate for their grade level. Reading for meaning and enjoyment is not part of fluency instruction. Comprehension and reading for pleasure are considered different parts of the reading curriculum—apart from fluency. Fluency is not viewed as integral to real reading.

## Why Fluency Should Be Hot

I believe that fluency should be a hot topic for teachers and scholars and reading. My conception of fluency puts it at the center of authentic reading

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instruction in which the aim of students' reading is comprehension (Rasinski, 2006). With the simple model of reading I propose next, I hope to address the preceding concerns about fluency and demonstrate how it is a critical component for effective instruction.

Pikulski and Chard (2005) described fluency as a bridge from word recognition accuracy to text comprehension (see Figure). I think they are right on with this metaphor. Fluency has two essential components: automaticity and prosody. Automaticity refers to the ability to recognize words automatically or effortlessly (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Prosody completes the bridge by connecting to comprehension.

### Automaticity—The Link to Word Recognition

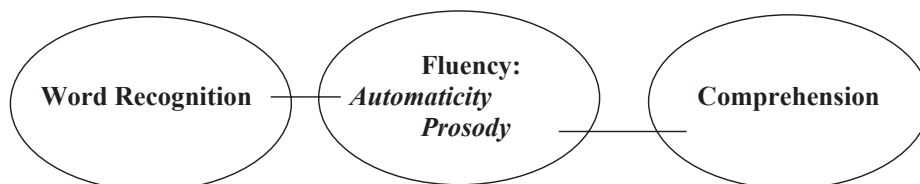
It is not enough for readers to read the words in text accurately—they need to read the words automatically. LaBerge and Samuels (1974) posited that all readers have a limited amount of attention, or what I have come to call *cognitive energy*. If they have to use too much of that cognitive energy to decode the words in text, they have little remaining for the more important

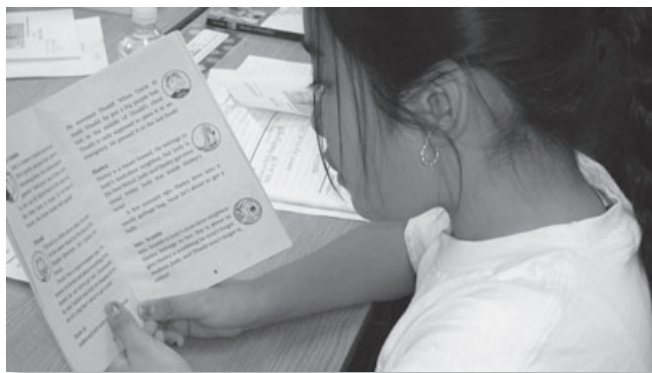
task in reading—comprehension. These students are marked by their slow, laborious, and staccato reading of texts.

Our goal should be for readers to read the words in texts accurately and *automatically*. When the words in text are identified automatically, readers can employ most of their limited cognitive energy to that all-important task in reading—text comprehension. For many readers, comprehension while reading suffers not because the readers have insufficient cognitive resources to make meaning out of the text read, but because they depleted those resources by having to employ them in word recognition. These are the same readers who would easily understand a text if it were read to them—when someone else takes on the task of decoding the words, they can employ their cognitive resources to making meaning.

Readers develop their word recognition automaticity in the same way that other automatic processes in life are developed—through wide and deep practice. *Wide reading* refers to the common classroom practice of reading a text once followed by discussion, response, and instruction aimed at developing some specific reading

Figure A Critical Bridge in Reading





strategies and skills. The routine then begins anew with a different text. A general purpose of wide reading is to increase the volume of reading by having students read one new text after another. This is a type of reading done by most adults, and it is clearly a key component of any effective reading program.

Deep reading is more commonly referred to as repeated reading (Samuels, 1979). Deep reading occurs when a student is asked to read a single text repeatedly until a level of fluency is achieved. Think of those struggling students who have not yet achieved automaticity in their word recognition. They read the passage for the first time (and only time, as in wide reading), and they don't read it very well—they know it and you know it. The slow, halting reading that characterizes less than automatic word recognition will have a detrimental effect on the reader's comprehension. I think that rather than moving on to the next passage after some discussion and instruction, as is done in wide reading, the teacher needs to have the student read the passage more than once until some degree of automaticity is achieved with that passage.

When readers read a text more than once, it is not unusual that they would demonstrate improvement with every

successive reading on that text practiced. That's to be expected: Repeated practice improves the performance of the actual activity practiced. The real value of deep or repeated reading is shown when students move on to a new and not previously read passage. What students learn from the repeated reading of one passage partially transfers to the new passage. Several reviews of research on fluency have shown that word recognition accuracy, automaticity, comprehension, and attitude toward reading have been shown to improve with repeated readings (Dowhower, 1994; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Rasinski et al., 2011). Wide reading and deep reading are foundational to any effective fluency program or intervention.

The problem with repeated readings becomes evident when readers intuit a purpose for the deep reading that focuses primarily on reading speed and away from meaning. Because fluency (automaticity) has come to be measured by a reader's speed of reading, for many students (and teachers), the goal of repeated readings has evolved into increasing one's reading speed (e.g., students are required to read passages from their reading book multiple times until they achieve a predetermined reading rate). When students engage in this form of repeated reading and their reading rates are measured weekly and then charted so that they can see their gains in speed, speed itself becomes the default goal of repeated readings and all of fluency instruction.

It is not difficult to see the manifestations of fluency instruction

in many classrooms. Students graph their own reading rates to see gain. I have witnessed students respond to requests to read orally with "Do you want me to read this story as fast as I can?" I am increasingly hearing students describe the "best" reader in their class as one "who reads fast." I know of no compelling research that has demonstrated that a primary focus on increasing reading speed results in improved comprehension and satisfaction in reading. Indeed, I have seen cases in which students' comprehension actually declines as they learn to blow through periods, commas, and other forms of punctuation in their quest for speed in reading.

Evidence of this emphasis on reading speed can be seen in the ever-increasing norms for reading rate that have appeared in some commercial fluency programs (Rasinski & Hamman, 2010). What was considered an average reading rate for a particular grade level 10 years ago is now considered below average. Although the reading rates have increased over the past decade, overall reading achievement has remained stagnant. Specific and intentional emphasis on improving reading rates simply does not work.

There is no question that we should want students to increase their reading rate. But this should happen in the way

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that reading rate has improved for all of you reading this article—through authentic wide and deep reading practice.

## The Other Side of Fluency—Prosody

If automaticity is the fluency link to word recognition, prosody completes the bridge by linking fluency to comprehension.

The more common term for prosody in reading is *reading with expression*. If we think of someone who is a fluent reader or speaker, we generally do not think of a person who speaks or reads fast. Rather, we are more likely to think of someone who uses their voice to help convey meaning to a listener when speaking or reading orally. Prosody enhances and adds to the meaning of a text. Take, for example, the following sentence:

Robert borrowed my new bicycle.

This declarative sentence describes an act done by Robert. However, the simply oral emphasis on a single word can add implied meaning to the sentence.

*Robert* borrowed my new bicycle. (Robert, not Raymond, borrowed my bike.)

Robert *borrowed* my new bicycle. (Robert did not steal my bike.)

Robert borrowed *my* new bicycle. (Robert didn't borrow your bike, he borrowed mine.)

Robert borrowed my *new* bicycle. (Robert didn't borrow my old bike, he borrowed the new one.)

Robert borrowed my new *bicycle*. (Robert didn't borrow my new book, he borrowed my bike.)

Emphasizing a different word adds implied or inferred meaning—meaning that is not explicitly stated. Moreover, it is commonly accepted that inferential comprehension is a higher level of comprehension than literal comprehension. So prosody allows the

reader to comprehend a text at a more sophisticated level than only the text itself offers.

Other scholars have argued that prosody in reading also assists the reader in identifying critical phrase boundaries that are not marked by punctuation (Schreiber, 1980, 1987, 1991; Schreiber & Read, 1980). Again, prosody allows the reader to infer information that is not explicitly stated in the passage.

A growing body of research is demonstrating that prosody in oral reading is related to overall proficiency in reading (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006, 2008). Moreover, prosody is not an issue solely for oral reading. Most adults I have surveyed indicate that they also hear themselves when they read silently. Indeed, several studies have found that readers at the third, fourth, fifth, and eighth grade levels who read orally with good prosody also tend to be good comprehenders when reading silently (Daane et al., 2005; Pinnell et al., 1995; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). Conversely, these same studies have found that readers who read with poor prosody (in a monotone and word-by-word manner) also have poor comprehension when reading silently.

Prosody is related to good reading—oral and silent. So how do readers develop their prosody in reading? Interestingly, prosody is developed in the very same way that automaticity, the other component of reading fluency, is developed—through wide and deep reading practice. As readers read widely,

they encounter different texts that require different prosodic elements to read with appropriate expression and meaning. As readers read deeply (reading one text several times), they gradually recognize and embed into their reading the prosodic elements that allow for a meaningful and expressive rendition of the text.

In the same way that actors rehearse a script to make a meaningful and authentic performance, readers read deeply to make a meaningful performance for themselves (or an audience, if reading to others). Moreover, through repeated reading, readers become more adept and efficient at employing prosodic features into new passages not previously read. Thus improved prosodic reading is another positive outcome of repeated reading.

Prosody and automaticity should go hand in hand. Both are developed through wide and deep reading. However, when the goal of deep reading is to intentionally improve reading speed, then prosody will almost always suffer. To read fast often means sacrificing prosody (as well as meaning). Fast reading very often is devoid of meaningful expression. Indeed, I feel that excessively fast reading can be just as disfluent as excessively slow reading—prosody and meaning are compromised in both excessively fast and slow reading.

Prosody is developed through wide and deep practice, as with automaticity. However, the goal of the deep practice has little to do with improved reading speed. When prosody is emphasized,

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the goal of the wide and repeated reading is to achieve an expressive oral reading of the passage that reflects and enhances the meaning of the passage. This, to me, is an authentic form of repeated readings. And when the goal of wide and repeated readings is to improve fluency to enhance comprehension, then fluency becomes hot again.

### **Teaching Fluency Authentically and Artfully**

The science of teaching reading has shown us that reading fluency is a key component to proficient reading and that teacher-guided wide and deep reading are two ways to improve reading. The art of teaching reading challenges all teachers to embed the science of reading instruction into their classrooms in ways that are authentic, engaging, and meaningful for students and that are integrated into the school reading curriculum.

Wide reading is already a staple in classroom reading instruction. All reading curricula worth their salt have students read authentic materials widely, whether stories from basal reading series or trade books, and follow that reading with discussions for deepening comprehension and instructional activities aimed at building specific reading skills and strategies.

Deep or repeated readings are less well integrated into the regular reading and school curriculum. In

many classrooms, as mentioned earlier, fluency is a separate add-on part of the reading curriculum in which students read and reread short passages, usually informational in nature, for the purpose of increasing their reading rates.

### **Performance and Voice**

How can deep reading be made more authentic and integral to the reading curriculum? One answer comes from the notion of performance for an audience. Actors, singers, poetry readers, and other performers have a natural reason to rehearse or engage in repeated readings—the performance itself. They wish to convey meaning with their voice. Thus, in classrooms, when reading can be cast in such a way that the text will eventually be performed, readers will have an authentic reason to engage in repeated readings. Moreover, the repeated reading is not aimed at improving reading speed, but in being able to engage in an oral reading that an audience will find meaningful and satisfying. A reading performance provides the authentic reason for repeated readings.

Are there texts that lend themselves to performance? The answer is quite obvious—readers theater scripts, dialogues, monologues, poetry, song lyrics, speeches and oratory, and, of course, narratives or stories all lend themselves to performance. Such texts have embedded in them a strong sense of voice (Culham, 2003). *Voice* is

a quality of writing that is manifested when a reader can “hear” the voice of the writer when reading. Voice in writing, then, is the flip side of prosody in reading. Materials that are written with voice are materials that are meant to be read with voice or prosody.

Thus an authentic approach to deep or repeated readings involves students rehearsing a text (script, song, poem, speech, etc.) over the course of a day or several days for the purpose of eventually performing the text for an audience of listeners. Imagine a classroom where the teacher assigns students a poem, song, readers theatre script, or other such text on a Monday. Then, throughout the week, students rehearse their assigned text in school under the coaching of the teacher and at home with parental support. On Fridays, students perform their assigned piece for an audience of classmates, parents, students, and teachers from other classrooms and even the school principal.

Such classrooms do exist. Indeed, classroom-based research has shown that this approach to deep reading does result in readers who make significant gains in reading with meaningful expression (prosody), read with improved automaticity in word recognition (read faster when assessed), demonstrate greater comprehension of passages read orally and silently, and



*“A growing number of studies are demonstrating that fluency is a major concern for students in grades 4 and 5, in middle school, and in high school.”*

find greater satisfaction and enjoyment in authentic reading experiences (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005; Young & Rasinski; 2009).

An approach to fluency such as this requires an expansion of what counts as appropriate reading materials. In most current classrooms, informational texts and narratives (stories) rule. This authentic approach to fluency requires us to consider texts meant to be performed. Readers Theatre scripts, poetry, dialogues, monologues, speeches, and the like are available through commercial publishers and on the Internet. However, I have found that students can create their own materials for fluency. Stories from trade books and basal reading programs as well as content from science, social studies, and math can be recast as scripts, dialogues, monologues, poems, and other performance texts. Such recasting challenges students to think about the content more deeply as they transform content from one genre to another. Thus comprehension and written expression can become more integrally linked to fluency.

### **But Is Fluency Instruction Only for the Primary Grades?**

This article, I hope, has convinced you that reading fluency should be a hot topic. Fluency is related to

comprehension and overall reading proficiency, both in silent and oral reading. Fluency can be taught in ways that students find authentic, engaging, and well connected to the literacy curriculum, as well as to other subject areas taught in school. Also, research has demonstrated that authentic fluency instruction can indeed improve students' reading fluency, comprehension, and attitude toward reading.

Fluency, however, is usually considered a lower level reading skill, one that should be mastered early in a student's literacy development. For teachers in the upper elementary, middle, and secondary grades, fluency should not be an issue.

The fact of the matter, however, is that even though in an ideal world fluency is something that is acquired early in one's school career, teachers and school administrators live in the real world—a world in which many students in the primary, intermediate, middle, and secondary grades struggle in reading. For many of these students, at least one source of their reading concern is a lack of fluency.

These students have trouble understanding what they read because they have significant difficulty recognizing the words they encounter in their reading and reading with appropriate phrasing and expression. Their frustration and disinterest in reading later mount when middle and high school reading assignments of

30 to 60 minutes become, in reality, assignments that require 90 to 180 minutes because of their lack of automaticity. Students' excessively slow reading requires double and triple the time of more skilled readers to make it through the same reading assignment (Rasinski, 2000).

A growing number of studies are demonstrating that fluency is a major concern for students in grades 4 (Daane et al., 2005; Pinnell et al., 1995) and 5, in middle school (Morris & Gaffney, 2011; Rasinski et al., 2009), and in high school (Rasinski et al., 2005). Moreover, authentic fluency instruction as described earlier in this article has shown remarkable potential for helping a wide range of students beyond the primary grades improve their fluency, overall reading achievement, and motivation for reading (e.g., Biggs, Homan, Dedrick, & Rasinski, 2008; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Rasinski et al., 2011; Solomon & Rasinski, in press).

In the way that fluency is approached by many commercial fluency programs around the world, fluency should not be considered a hot issue in reading. Fluency is more than mere reading fast, more than reading orally, more than an instructional issue for only young readers, more than a separate area of the reading curriculum. When fluency instruction is treated as both an art and a science that can be taught through authentic and engaging forms of deep and teacher-supported reading, then fluency will be the hot topic that it was 10 years ago. More importantly, when we as reading professionals recognize the power of teaching fluency using scientific principles and artistic approaches, fluency can and will make a significant impact on the reading achievement and reading dispositions of all readers, especially those whom we consider most at risk.

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## ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans

- "A Is for Apple: Building Letter-Recognition Fluency" by Jennifer Prior
- "Improving Fluency Through Group Literary Performance" by Devon Hamner

## IRA Books

- *Fluency: Differentiated Interventions and Progress-Monitoring Assessments* (4th ed.) by Jerry L. Johns and Roberta L. Berglund
- *What Research Has to Say About Fluency Instruction* edited by S. Jay Samuels and Alan E. Farstrup

## IRA Journal Articles

- "Literacy Trends and Issues: A Look at the Five Pillars and the Cement That Supports Them" by Jack Cassidy, Corinne Montalvo Valadez, and Sherrye D. Garrett, *The Reading Teacher*, May 2010
- "Putting Fluency on a Fitness Plan: Building Fluency's Meaning-Making Muscles" by Barclay Marcell, *The Reading Teacher*, December 2011