

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING FLUENCY

### What Is Fluency?

Fluency is one of the five key components of reading proficiency, along with phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension. Fluency is generally defined as the ability to read text both quickly and accurately with appropriate expression. Up until the last decade or so, fluency was often addressed sporadically, with most attention directed to the other components of reading proficiency. Now, development of fluency is seen as very important because there is a close relationship among word recognition, comprehension, and fluent reading. Fluent readers, in contrast to nonfluent readers, do not have to focus most on decoding words. Their higher level of automatic word recognition, ability to read in meaningful “chunks,” and sense of prosody allow them to direct their attention to the understanding of the text, to bring to bear their prior knowledge to the ideas in that text, and therefore to construct meaning.

Fluency happens gradually over time, through multiple opportunities for focused practice. It is important to realize that there is no one magic moment when fluency is “done,” as readers’ degree of fluency will change, depending on factors such as the genre they are reading, their familiarity with the words and topics, their amount of accumulated practice in reading text, and whether they are reading aloud or silently.

Most beginning readers of English, because they are just learning to connect sounds to letters and to blend letter sounds into words, read slowly and laboriously. They tend to read word for word with no expression or sense of word and sentence boundaries. Helping readers with words in isolation is important but not sufficient in terms of fluency development. Students need focused instruction and fluency practice using connected text.

### What Are the Elements of Fluency Development?

**Modeling** In order to become fluent readers, students need exposure to systematic modeling of fluent reading. By demonstrating what fluent reading is, teachers show how the reader’s voice helps make sense of written text. Daily reading aloud to students, with attention to pronunciation, phrasing, and expression, helps them understand what a fluent reader sounds like. For the primary grades, the use of big books, texts on transparencies, and texts on posters or chart paper helps focus students’ attention on the elements of fluency. As teachers read the words aloud, they use pointers or

their fingers to show where and how they pause, and when they raise or lower their voices.

**Text Accessibility** It is very important that students interact with texts at a level appropriate for fluency development. *Independent level text* refers to text that is relatively easy for the reader. The reader is in a comfort zone, and has difficulty with no more than one in twenty words (approximately 95% success). *Instructional level text* refers to text that is generally manageable but also somewhat challenging. The reader has difficulty with no more than one in ten words (approximately 90% success). *Frustration level text* refers to text that is too challenging for the reader's current level of development. The reader has difficulty with more than one in ten words (less than 90% success). For the purposes of fluency, students should have multiple opportunities to read text that is at their independent reading level, text that they can read with a success rate of approximately 95%. In many classrooms, teachers employ a mix of independent level text and instructional level text work. Students are allowed to self-select material at their independent reading level to read to the teacher, but they work on fluency with instructional level text only after extensive exposure to and work with that text. For example, they may have focused for some time on a combination of vocabulary development, phonics, or comprehension activities related to the instructional level text first.

**Repeated Reading** Research has consistently shown that repeated reading of the same text is an effective way to foster fluency development. There are several procedures teachers can use to provide these multiple opportunities for oral reading. These include one-on-one student-teacher reading, peer partner reading, choral reading, reader's theater, and recording-assisted reading.

In *student-teacher reading*, the teacher works one-on-one with the student. The teacher models the reading first, and then the student reads the text. As the student reads, the teacher provides help and feedback. The student rereads the text three to four times.

In *peer partner reading*, students work with each other. (1) For paired reading, the teacher may decide to put a more fluent reader together with a less fluent reader. The more fluent student reads the text first, and then the less fluent reader reads it back. The more fluent reader may help with word recognition and phrasing, as well as provide encouragement. (2) In another kind of paired reading, students of the same ability, having heard the teacher model the text, take turns reading the text to each other, up to three times each. They may fill out a short feedback form such as the Peer Partner Checklist. (3) In yet another form of peer reading, students form small

groups and take turns reading to each other. One group member reads a portion of text as the rest of the group listens. Then the group member reads each sentence and has the rest of the group echo-read after each sentence. The procedure is repeated for each group member, with another portion of the text read each time. When everyone has finished their portions of the text, the group reads the whole text together in unison.

In *choral reading*, teachers read from a big book or other text that all students can see at the same time. The teacher chooses a text at the independent reading level of the majority of students, and models the reading. Then the teacher reads the text again as students read aloud at the same time, three to five times.

In *reader's theater*, students use repeated reading of text as a means to an end—the expressive classroom performance of a scene related to a text students have studied earlier. The teacher, with or without student participation, chooses a meaningful dialogue-rich portion of text, and then provides students with scripts for rehearsal. Students prepare for their roles by repeatedly practicing their lines so that they can read them smoothly and expressively in their live performance.

In *recording-assisted reading*, students first listen to an audio source (e.g., CD, video), and then echo-read or simultaneously read the text along with the recording.

**Silent Reading** Development of fluency is most effective when teachers spend class time working with nonfluent students directly, engaging in such activities as those described above. Modeling and explicit instruction in word recognition, phrasing, and reading rate are very important for struggling readers. These students tend to benefit less from independent silent reading in the classroom because they do not yet have the automaticity, phrasing, and reading speed they need to do so. Many teachers, however, have built in time for independent reading using such systems as Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) or Drop Everything and Read (DEAR). During this scheduled independent reading time, students with few reading issues can read independently, and students with reading problems can work directly with the teacher in a separate area of the classroom. If direct instruction is not possible, they should work on recording-assisted reading activities while other students read silently.

This is not to say that struggling students should never read silently. If they have finished a class activity or a test early, they could certainly take advantage of that time to read something at their independent reading level while other class members finish up. Or they could read silently for extra points during lunchtime, or in an after-school reading club. All students should be encouraged to read more as much as possible, especially at home.

## How Is Progress in Fluency Development Measured?

Every struggling reader has individual issues. Students from different countries who are just learning English have many adjustments to make that other native but struggling readers do not have. For example, some nonnative speakers may be accustomed to reading from right to left, or vertically rather than horizontally. Some may know different alphabetic systems, or none at all. Some may have difficulty with distinguishing and producing sounds that are not present in their native languages. It is only logical, then, to assume that these students will progress more slowly in fluency development than native speakers do.

Progress in fluency can be measured both informally and formally. For example, for informal assessment, teachers may circulate around the room while students are reading aloud to each other. They may fill in a checklist, use a simple rubric, or take notes on several readers as they walk around the room. If teachers do this every day, they can consistently cover all of their students, a few at a time. Teachers may also ask students to read text into a tape recorder from time to time. Some teachers use miscue analysis, keep running records, or use an Informal Reading Inventory (IRI).

In formal assessment, teachers look for targeted improvement in reading rate, in phrasing, in expression, and in comprehension while reading aloud. They use timed readings to compare students' performances, calculating the number of words read correctly per minute. These results are often compared to any one of a number of published oral reading fluency norms or standards, such as Deno's Curriculum-Based Measurement/Oral Reading Fluency assessment (CBM/ORF), Good and Kaminski's Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), or Johns and Lenski's Basic Reading Inventory (BRI). It is important to remember that these norms are not necessarily a reliable indication of overall performance for nonnative speakers of English, due to their native language backgrounds and developing levels of English. Teachers can more accurately measure the progress of these students by comparing each student's previous performances against the latest performance.

**Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) Calculation** This procedure is used with one-minute timed readings. Errors are subtracted from the total number of words read in one minute to arrive at the number of words correct per minute.

1. For formal assessment, choose a passage equal to or slightly above the word counts used on the unit fluency pages in the Student's Book. The passage should be one students have worked with before.
2. Working one on one, have the student read the text aloud for exactly one minute. As the student reads, mark the number of errors (substitution of a

word, omission of a word, insertion of a new word, reversal of two words, repetition of a word).

3. After one minute, stop the student. Count up the number of words read.
4. Count up the number of errors made during the reading.
5. Subtract the number of errors from the total number of words read during the minute. The result is the number of words correct per minute.
6. Use this procedure several times throughout the year to measure the student's growth in fluency.