Why Fluency Matters

Dr. Cathy Watkins

What Is Fluency?

Every teacher has listened to students engage in the slow and effortful process of reading word by word, and even though the student identifies every word correctly, she misses the point of the text. Decoding accurately simply isn't enough. In order to be proficient readers, students must read fluently.

Wolf and Katzir-Cohen (2001) define reading fluency as "... a level of accuracy and rate, where decoding is relatively effortless; where oral reading is smooth and accurate with correct prosody; and where attention can be allocated to comprehension."

We are able to measure oral-reading fluency precisely by measuring the number of words that students are able to read correctly in one minute. In their landmark study, Hasbrouck and Tindal (1992) concluded that a fluent reader at fifth grade or above can read an unrehearsed passage correctly at the rate of 150 words/minute. *(See Appendix A: Curriculum-Based Norms in Oral-Reading Fluency.)*

Why Is Fluency Important?

Fluency is important because it is related to other important educational outcomes. Fluency helps learners perform a skill for an extended period of time with better attention to the task and with less distraction and fatigue (Binder, Haughton, and Van Eyk, 1990). It should not be surprising that students who lack reading fluency find it difficult to stay on task when asked to engage in extended-reading activities, such as sustained silent reading. In addition, fluency ensures that learners will be able to retain or recall information (Binder, 1996).

Obviously, if reading text is effortful and inefficient, it will be difficult for the child to remember what has been read (National Reading Panel, 2002). Without fluent decoding, there is little opportunity for the child to understand the passage. Unless words are recognized automatically, it is difficult to read words in context and to relate those words to background knowledge, which is necessary for comprehension. The ability to obtain meaning from print depends critically on the development of reading fluency (Snow, Burns, Griffin, 1998). Thus, the ultimate goal of fluency instruction is reading comprehension.

How Is Fluency Developed?

The foundation of oral-reading fluency is a solid base in reading skills, such as phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence, and automatic word recognition. Wolf and Katzir-Cohen (2001) stress the need to emphasize both accuracy and fluency at each stage of our teaching, from the identification of letters to reading connected stories. When students do not achieve fluent performance in these critical skills, new skills are more difficult to learn. The result is stress, inattention, and lack of motivation (Binder, Haughton, and Bateman, 2002).

According to Torgesen, Rashotee, and Alexander (2001), every year struggling readers fall farther behind. They miss multiple chances to learn new words because they read inaccurately and because they don't read as often as better readers. By the time struggling readers reach third and fourth grade, their "sight-word vocabulary" is limited, especially in comparison to good readers at the same grade level. Even after remediation, there is still an enormous gap between the number of words they recognize by sight and the number recognized by fluent readers.

The single most important factor in determining how fluently a child will read a passage is the proportion of sight words in the passage. Unless remediated readers can add words to their "sight vocabulary" at a faster rate than their peers, the fluency gap will continue. *(See Appendix B: Standards for Weekly Reading Growth.)*

Repeated reading helps build a bank of quickly identified words. This, coupled with the redundancy of language, helps add words to the student's sight vocabulary.

Which Strategies Are Most Effective in Building Fluency?

There is common agreement that practice is essential to developing reading fluency. But what kind of practice should teachers provide? The National Reading Panel reviewed experimental research on the following major instructional approaches to fluency development:

- Procedures designed to increase the amount of independent reading (e.g., sustained silent reading)
- Procedures emphasizing guided oral-reading practice.

The National Reading Panel **did not** find evidence that encouraging independent silent reading produces gains in reading achievement. In contrast, the Panel **did** find clear evidence that practices encouraging repeated oral reading produce positive effects on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension (NRP, pp. 3–4).

S. J. Samuels (1985) first suggested repeated reading as a way to develop oral-reading fluency. Repeated reading involves students reading a selected passage aloud to establish their initial reading rate on that passage. A target rate is then specified for that passage. The student reads the passage repeatedly until the specified criterion is achieved. Then the student moves to another passage and repeats the process.

Teachers who cannot provide one-on-one support may choose partner reading as an alternative (Osborn, Lehr, and Hiebert, 2003). This activity begins with students following along in the text as they listen to the passage read aloud by a proficient reader, who may be the teacher, a classmate, a parent, or a taped auditory model. Then partners can take turns reading the passage to each other. Students reread the passage until they reach the target rate.

Research Conclusions

Research has identified three critical factors in remediating fluency problems. First, accuracy in decoding is fundamental. Students must practice with materials that are easy to read. Students should practice reading text that is at the instructional level (text the student can read with 90%–94% accuracy) or independent level (text the student can read with 95% accuracy or above).

Second, teachers must provide multiple opportunities for students to practice oral reading each day. This practice can include reading and rereading text a specified number of times and reading to a specified fluency (target) rate.

Finally, research has shown that monitoring student progress is an important feature of fluency instruction. Recording student progress on a graph, for example, provides feedback as well as being a great source of motivation.

Ravenscourt Books Fluency Research

The chart below includes other conclusions drawn from research and how they are put into practice in *Ravenscourt Books.*

Scientific Research Base	Ravenscourt Books Applies Research
Predetermining the mastery level for speed is appropriate for word-by-word readers and older remedial students.	**Assessing Fluency** on page 4 of the *Teacher's Guides* explains how to set realistic target reading rates.
Reading fluency develops over time and requires practice.	Fluency passages are marked with asterisks in each chapter of every book.
Rereading the same passage significantly increases reading rate.	Two **Fluency Passages** for each book are reprinted in the *Teacher's Guides.*
Feedback concerning the accuracy and rate of reading helps students acquire fluency.	The software and the *Teacher's Guides* provide a **Fluency Graph** for monitoring student practice and progress.
Practicing one passage to a set rate of reading speed leads to increases of speed and accuracy in unpracticed passages.	Each set of *Ravenscourt Books* has a minimum target rate per level. Students practice the fluency passages at that rate and eventually read unpracticed passages at the designated rate.
For reading practice to be effective, the student should read passages with 85% or better accuracy.	*Ravenscourt Books* are based on the decoding skills and words introduced in *Corrective Reading,* Decoding B1, **B2,** and **C,** and are at least 95% decodable.
Comprehension is highly dependent upon word recognition and fluency skills.	**Word Lists** on pages 5 and 6 of the *Teacher's Guides* gives procedures for preteaching the unfamiliar and nondecodable words for each chapter of every book.
Using a read-along or model approach is appropriate when children are reading with few errors but at a slow rate.	Stories on *Fluency Audiotapes/CDs* are read at a rate that allows students to read along, tracking and subvocalizing with the tape.
Repeated oral reading with the use of audiotapes, peer or adult assistance, or other feedback increases fluency.	**Fluency Practice** on pages 6 and 7 of the *Teacher's Guides* outlines several ways to practice rereading passages to increase oral-reading speed.
Rereading a passage significantly increases comprehension.	**Lesson Plan** on page 3 and **Reading the Chapter** on page 6 of the *Teacher's Guides* explain how to reread to increase comprehension.
When the stories are at the same reading level, comprehension gains on practiced text carry over to new, unpracticed text.	Each set of *Ravenscourt Books* was designed with a narrow readability range. The books in **The Unexpected** average a 1.9 grade level; in **Overcoming Adversity,** the average readability is 3.0; in **Reaching Goals,** the books average 5.0.

Ravenscourt Books Fluency Research

About the Author

Cathy L. Watkins received her doctorate from the University of Florida. She is currently Professor of Special Education at California State University–Stanislaus and Director of the Center for Direct Instruction. She trains and supervises teachers at the university and in public schools and consults with school districts and other educational agencies.

Dr. Watkins is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst™ and past president of the California Association for Behavior Analysis. She is on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Direct Instruction, The Behavior Analyst,* and *Education and Treatment of Children.* She serves on the Advisory Board of the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies. In 2002, Dr. Watkins received the Excellence in Education Award for College Teaching and Staff Development from the Association for Direct Instruction.

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Ravenscourt Books Fluency Research

Appendix A: Curriculum-Based Norms in Oral-Reading Fluency
Jan E. Hasbrouck and Gerald Tindal, (1992)

Grade	% ile	**Fall** wcpm	**Winter** wcpm	**Spring** wcpm
2	75	82	106	124
	50	53	78	94
	25	23	46	65
3	75	107	123	142
	50	79	93	114
	25	65	70	87
4	75	125	133	143
	50	99	112	118
	25	72	89	92
5	75	126	142	151
	50	105	118	128
	25	77	93	100
Upper Grades	50%ile	125–150+		

wcpm = number of words read correctly in one minute from unpracticed, grade-level materials (average from 2 passages).

Students read generic, unpracticed, grade-level passages aloud for one minute. Errors (substitutions, omissions, insertions, hesitations) were subtracted from the total number of words read, leaving the number of words read correctly in one minute.

Appendix B: Standards for Weekly Reading Growth
Fuchs, Fuchs, Hammett, et al, (1993)

New words learned per week		
Grade	Realistic Goals	Ambitious Goals
1	2	3
2	1.5	2.0
3	1.0	1.5
4	.85	1.1
5	.5	.8
6	.3	.65

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