Increasing Reading Fluency

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Efforts to develop instruction that more effectively addresses the reading and language needs of adolescent students must include attention to increasing their reading fluency. When proficient readers read, they achieve comprehension by applying what they know about how to maneuver the challenges in a text, such as word meanings and language structures and concepts that are new or unusual. They can call on a store of skills and strategies to negotiate these challenges to understanding. Readers who lack these skills and strategies are stuck, striving to make it though a text, and growing increasingly frustrated with their inability to understand what they read. Improving reading fluency is one way to help these readers move through text the way that proficient readers do and so reduce the frustration that often leads them to give up on reading altogether. Indeed, research analyses identify reading fluency as one of the five key components of effective reading instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). More specifically, the research shows that increased reading fluency is related strongly and positively to increased reading comprehension (Samuels & Farstrup, 2006). Reading fluency is a critical component of effective reading instruction and most be considered as highly as decoding, vocabulary and comprehension instruction (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). Still, instructional intensity around fluent reading at the secondary level is less than adequate to create fluent readers (Paige, 2012).

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What Is Reading Fluency?

Researchers offer varying definitions of fluency, but most agree that, in broad terms, reading fluency refers to the ability of readers to recognize and decode words and comprehend at the same time. As Pikulski and Chard (2005, p. 510) explain, fluency is a developmental process that is "manifested in accurate, rapid, expressive oral reading and is applied during, and makes possible, silent reading comprehension."

Oral reading with speed, accuracy, and expression are indicators of the ability to decode. For students to comprehend what they read, however, they must possess more than well-developed decoding skills. Suppose, for example, that students are given the following paragraph to read:

> The national debate over the impoverishment of inner-city populations and the presumed failure of New Deal initiatives such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children and public housing have, for the most part, been structured by a group of theoretical perspectives and empirical assumptions emphasizing individual responsibility for a variety of social ills such as economic dependency, family disorder, and crime (Bennett, Smith, & Wright, 2006, p. 9).

Some students may be able to accurately decode each word of the paragraph, and with a speed that is characteristic of a moderately fluent reader. However, these students may still be unfamiliar with the words impoverishment, initiatives, and empirical, and with concepts such as New Deal or inner-city. Therefore, even though they read with speed and accuracy, these students do not read with comprehension. For comprehension to take place, readers must have sufficient vocabulary and background knowledge to access the information in the text.

Effective fluency instruction recognizes that limited vocabulary and background knowledge are major barriers to comprehension, particularly for striving readers and English learners, and takes care to address both vocabulary and cognitive development (Pressley, Gaskins, & Fingeret, 2006).

For English learners (ELs), the English vocabulary and language structures in their content area reading materials pose a special challenge to fluency. As Palumbo and Willicutt (2006, p. 161) explain, even when these students determine the meaning of a new word in a text, they must "have a place to fit the meaning within a mental framework, or schema for representing that meaning with associated concepts . . . . English words they decode may not yield meaning for them."

Palumbo and Willicutt conclude that if instruction is to help ELs to decode and comprehend at a productive pace, it must increase both their store of English words and their familiarity with English story grammars, text structure, and, perhaps, new concepts. Research shows that ELs benefit

when vocabulary support is incorporated into texts; when students are afforded opportunities to read multiple texts on the same subject; and when they receive explicit instruction about how to apply their own, culturally familiar experiences to achieve understanding.

In addition to improving vocabulary and comprehension strategies, many striving readers also need practice routines to develop their reading fluency. They may need practice with intonation, phrasing, and expression. Striving readers often benefit from repeated readings of familiar text in which they gradually improve phrasing and intonation and also record improvements in reading rate measured in words correct per minute (WCPM). Readers enhance textual meaning by reading with appropriate fluency (Paige, Rasinski, Magpuri-Lavell, 2012).

Effective Fluency Instruction

Scientifically based research findings converge on several practices that are essential for effective fluency instruction. These practices include the following:

- Identifying students in need of foundational skill development and providing age-appropriate, systematic, explicit instruction for those students.

- Selecting appropriate texts that are engaging and age-appropriate.

- Building vocabulary and background knowledge so students can access new and unfamiliar texts.

- Helping students become familiar with the syntax or language structures of different text genres.

- Teaching students specific comprehension strategies that allow them to read successfully and independently.

- Engage students in deep and wide reading.

- Allowing students to sometimes choose materials to read that they find interesting.

- Teaching routines that combine teacher modeling with guided and independent student practice, along with constant encouragement and feedback.

- Practice routines to develop automaticity and fluency at the word level and in reading connected text.

- Encouraging students to monitor and improve their fluent reading rates.

Applying the Research: *Hampton-Brown Edge*

Edge provides robust support for fluency development, including all of the research-based practices cited above. Explicit, systematic instruction in foundational reading skills is provided through **Inside Phonics**. The **Edge** anthologies build fluency and vocabulary and the Language and Grammar Lab addresses foundational and grade level syntax and grammar skills.

Engaging Literature Student literature includes a wide variety of selections on engaging, challenging, and age-appropriate topics. Students are further motivated to read through lessons that connect to their own experience and generate curiosity about selection content. Narratives that have a strong voice and that are useful for fluency instruction are included. While students are consistently and systematically exposed to more complex grade-level texts, fluency practice focuses on short passages that are accessible.

Vocabulary, Language, and Comprehension The instructional plan includes extensive exploration and development of vocabulary, genre understanding, and language structures. Comprehension lessons provide scaffolded direct instruction support to help students understand and internalize the comprehension strategies that proficient readers use habitually.

Fluency Practice Routines *Edge* also provides daily practice routines for developing reading accuracy, intonation, phrasing, expression, and rate. Fluency practice passages are included for each week of instruction, with teaching support that includes modeling of the target skill (for example, phrasing), and a five-day plan for improving the skill through choral reading, collaborative reading, recorded reading, reading and marking the text, and reading to assess. Assessment includes a timed reading of the passage and reading rate in words correct per minute (WCPM). Students are encouraged to graph their reading rate over time so they can monitor their improvement.

Comprehension Coach

The Comprehension Coach interactive software at Levels C–E provides a risk-free and private environment where striving readers and ELs can develop their reading power and fluency. All student literature selections are included with comprehension and vocabulary supports. Students can read silently or listen to a model of the selection being read fluently. They can also record and listen to their own reading of the selection. After a recording, the software automatically calculates and graphs their reading rate in WCPM.

Conclusion

Edge provides the full range of research-based support that striving readers and English learners need to become fluent, proficient, and confident readers.