

DEVELOPING UNDERGRADUATES' READING FLUENCY

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Abstract:

Once entering university level, students are more likely required to be independent learners and to acquire better cognitive skills; for instance, they are expected to read a larger quantity of both curriculum and extra materials. Drawing on her own experience of teaching reading skill, Thao however finds that her students are too dictionary-dependent and just continually stop to search for meaning of unknown words. This impedes their reading fluency and speed, which, in some way, affects their comprehension.

Unless students can develop their reading fluency, presumably they cannot read anything other than what is allocated in the curriculum. Neither can they perform well in such international exams as IELTS, TOEFL or Cambridge which are compulsory for them to become official teachers according to the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project.

Given the need to develop fluent readers, the presenter will focus on some activities which help students develop their fluency in reading. She will discuss how to tackle these activities in the classroom so that they work out effectively. There will be examples for demonstration in which participants of the workshop can be involved.

I. Introduction

There have been numerous definitions of reading fluency. According to Meyer and Felton (1999), for instance, fluency is “the ability to read connected text rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly, and automatically with little conscious attention to the mechanics of reading, such as decoding”. The National Reading Panel emphasized speed, accuracy and proper expression as the main components of reading fluency (2000). Accuracy refers to the ability to recognize or decode words correctly. Strong understanding of the alphabetic principle, the ability to blend sounds together, the

ability to use other cues to the identity of words in text, and knowledge of a large bank of high frequency words are required for word reading accuracy. Reading rate comprises both fluent identification of individual words and the speed and fluidity with which the reader moves through connected text. As children practice in learning to read, they come to recognize larger and larger numbers of words “by sight” without having to sound them out or guess at their identity from contextual cues. Well-practiced words are recognized automatically, which implies that recognition occurs very quickly and with little cognitive effort. It is not enough to get a word right if a great deal of cognitive effort is required to do so, because the effort and attention involved in phonemically decoding words, or in guessing at words from context, distract the reader’s attention from building a coherent representation of the meaning of the text (Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker, & Stahl, 2004)

The National Institute for Literacy supplemented one more factor to fluency, i.e., comprehension. Students who are able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and expression, but who do not simultaneously understand what they read, are not fluent. There is some connection between fluency and comprehension. The former does not ensure the latter, but the latter is difficult to be achieved without the former. If a reader continually stops to decode and figure out unknown words, most likely meaning will be disrupted and the process of reading becomes laborious. When students make progress in fluency, they are able to put their energies into comprehension and are able to construct and interpret meaning. Fluent readers are more likely to comprehend and remember the material because they read without difficulty and in an efficient way (Rasinski, 2000).

Chang (2012) pointed out that reading fluency has been ignored in a second or foreign language learning context; a major reason for this maybe that more weight has been given to accurate word decoding than automaticity or speed. Studies have shown that many L2 readers read laboriously and far more slowly than in their native language. Data from Segalowitz, Poulsen, and Komoda (1991) indicate that L2 reading rates of highly bilingual readers are 30% or much slower than L1 reading rates. As

Perkins and Pharis (1980) stated, average ESL readers are well below average English native readers in reading ability.

Researchers have shown that reading in first and second or foreign language can be very different. Different reading processes such as recognizing words, predicting and inferring meaning, and applying background knowledge simultaneously occur during reading in a reader's L1, whereas in L2 reading, there is added complexity (Mazur, 2005). Mikulecky(1990) claims that L2 readers read word-by-word, simultaneously translating to L1. By doing this, these readers may get a feeling of security that they know every word, and therefore know the meaning of the text. But in fact, reading every word may impede comprehension.

II. Importance of reading fluency:

Spear-Swerling (2006) identified three reasons for the importance of fluency reading. First, if students need to put effort into reading individual words, they tend to lose comprehension. Second, students with poor fluency often experience reading as laborious and difficult, so they lose motivation to read. Thus, reading becomes unenjoyable. Lack of motivation to read results in less practice, further compounding the difficulties of struggling readers. And third, as they advance in school, students with poor fluency have difficulty keeping up with the high volume of reading required for academic success. In fact, disfluent readers tend to fall behind in academic achievement. When students move to higher education level, there is a shift from learning to read into reading to learn. In addition to developing overall reading proficiency, and cultivating vocabulary, they need to understand and retain information.

Anderson (1999) talked about the relationship between reading rate and comprehension: "It is possible to increase reading rate in an L2 without a concomitant decrease in comprehension". Likewise, Nuttall (1996) describes the frustration resulting from slower reading through what she calls "the vicious cycle of the weak reader": "Readers who do not understand often slow down their reading rates, and then do not enjoy reading because it takes so much time. As a result, they do not read much and continue the vicious cycle". She suggests that by increasing reading rates, the reader

can get into the virtuous cycle of the good reader. By reading faster, the reader is encouraged to read more, and with more reading, comprehension improves.

III. Activities for developing reading fluency:

As students arrive at the university level, they are usually required or expected to read larger quantities of materials not just in reading skill, but also in other subjects. In order to develop proficiency in language at large, and in reading particularly, they must not rely solely on classroom learning, but should make use of their silent independent reading time. However, those who have not yet attained fluency are not likely to make efficient use of it. It is, therefore, important for the teacher to provide direct instruction related to fluency.

Fluency reading can be either silent or oral, but most approaches and models pertaining to fluency developing are oral. Indeed, research suggests that oral reading practice and instruction is most effective for developing fluency even though the ultimate goal of reading fluency practice is to be able to read silently with speed, accuracy and a high level of comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Oral reading can act as a direct measure of fluency. Without listening to students read, we cannot know if they are struggling readers and need work on fluency.

1. Introducing fluency criteria

Before teachers provide any instructional activities, they may consider helping students be familiar with the word ‘fluency’ and understand what fluency sounds or looks like. The following activity can help to introduce fluency and its criteria to students:

The teacher can start by asking: “What do you think the word *fluency* means?”. Students may say: “Being able to read really fast; sounding normal when you read and not too slow.” If students are unfamiliar with the word, tell them it means being able to read without sounding out every word and reading smoothly in the way that the author meant for it to sound. Discuss and explain the criteria of fluency including accuracy, rate, and prosody (expression, intonation, punctuation and phrasing).

Tell students you will read aloud a piece of text three different ways. Challenge them to try to decide which of the three readings they would call fluent, based on the criteria.

Read the piece the first time really quickly, so quickly that you can hardly be understood. Make mistakes, but just ignore them and plow right through to the end. Do not attend to punctuation, do not pronounce things clearly, and do not give yourself or your listener time to think about what's on the page. Ask students if that seemed "fluent" to them and listen for the reasons why they say "yes" or "no." Many students will tell you "yes" because it was really fast. Students often hold the misconception that reading quickly is the goal, even if they can't understand what's being read. They often believe reading quickly is the most impressive skill a reader can strive for. Ask students if they have any idea what the passage you just read is about. (Most students will likely respond "no" because they did not have time to absorb the information when the text was read so quickly.) Focus their attention on the rate and flow fluency criteria.

Ask them to listen to the next version and decide if they think it is fluent. This time, read the passage very slowly, word by word, sounding out every fifth word or so. Again, pay no attention to punctuation. Make errors and ignore them. Ask students to tell you what they thought of the fluency of that reading. Most will answer with a resounding "No! That was not fluent." But push them to try to name the reasons why based on the criteria (listen for them to reference rate and flow that is "appropriate for the piece" and/or accuracy). Also listen for students to name anything about punctuation or the robotic nature of the voice. Ask students once again if they understood anything about the passage. Students will likely answer "no" this time, as well. Ask them to explain and listen for them to mention the errors, slow rate, and/or lack of adherence to phrasing, punctuation, or expression as a hindrance to their comprehension of the piece.

Read the passage a third time. This time, read it at an "appropriate rate." Wear your intention to help students understand the criteria for fluency, with every move you

make. Make a mistake or two, but show how fluent readers would self-correct. Match your facial expression and body language to the piece. Change your rate, volume pitch, and tone to reflect an understanding of the author's intended message. Next, ask students to tell you if they thought that was fluent reading. If they still aren't sure, ask them to refer to and discuss in fluency criteria to help them make a decision. After several minutes, ask students to share their thoughts with the class. Listen for them to recognize that based on the criteria, the way the piece was read aloud the third time is an example of fluent reading. Ask them to refer specifically to each criterion to name the things you did that made the passage easy to listen to and understand.

As students share out, make a list of their ideas on a chart named *Fluent Readers Do These Things* . Listen for:

Fluent Readers Do These Things:

- Read almost all words correctly.
- Read at a smooth pace without taking breaks that leave the listener hanging.
- Pause at commas and fully stop at periods.
- Read questions like questions and exclamations with excitement.
- Change voice and volume depending on meaning.
- Change the tone to match the message (sad, serious, funny, joyful, surprised).
- Match the story with your face and body.
- Correct mistakes.

2. Repeated reading

Students choose their own appropriate text or the teacher assigns a passage. The teacher discusses reading behaviors such as phrasing, rate, intonation, e.t.c. The students practice their text several times until they can read it fluently, accurately and

effortlessly. For example, they may try to read a short 100-word paragraph three times in two minutes (Anderson, 1999). The criterion levels may vary from class to class, but reasonable goals to work towards are criterion levels of 150 words per minute at 70% comprehension. This activity can be practiced in either silent or oral form. Silent repeated reading allows students to practice another component: prosody. The teacher might provide a fluent model of the text prior to students' actual practice, which can be done through the teacher's reading or a recorded audio.

As learners do repeated reading exercises, they come to realize how this activity can improve their reading comprehension. They understand more when reading something twice at a faster reading rate than when reading it slowly only one time. This activity helps empower second language readers and strengthens their metacognitive awareness of the merit of faster reading rates.

3. Rate-buildup drill:

Students are given one minute to read as much as they can from a chosen text. After the first one minute ends, they start reading again from the beginning of the text for an additional one minute. This drill is repeated a third and a fourth time. Students should be able to read the 'old' material faster and faster and also more accurately with better comprehension. This should enable them to read more material during the next one minute periods than in the first. As students repeat this activity, their reading rate should increase. After conducting it for four one-minute periods, encourage students to continue reading the text through to the end.

4. Timed reading

Students are required to read a text at an appropriate level under some degree of time pressure. Anderson (1999) recommends 150 words per minute. Students can either time themselves or, if they do not have a watch with a second hand, the teacher should use a watch or clock to keep time for the class. In order to measure achievement and progress against the class goal, have all students start reading at the same time. Instruct students that when they finish reading, they are to look up at the board in the classroom. As students are reading, write the passing time on the board at fifteen-second intervals.

Start the count after students have been reading for one minute. When students have finished reading, they should look at the most recent time recorded on the board and use it to enter their reading rate in the reading rate chart.

5. Reader's theater

Students choose or are assigned with a piece a literature with a strong story line or a chapter from a content area book that can be read in parts. Play is usually a good choice as plays are rich in dialog and best for practicing intonation and oral expression (prosody). The focus of the activity is on the process, not the production. Students do not have to memorize lines, wear costumes, or use sets or props. The only way for them to convey the meaning through their reading. After practicing their reading and rehearsing several times, students can present it to the rest of the class or to another group.

This activity is fun and engaging. It promotes cooperative interaction with peers and makes reading appealing. The literary authentic materials give them a meaningful purpose to read. Additionally, it does not require the amount of time and preparation of traditional classroom plays.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the importance of reading fluency and its criteria, and suggests some activities to help learners become more rapid, and fluent readers. Given that fluency reading is important to students' overall reading and academic achievement, it is necessary for teachers to integrate focused, systematic, regular practice and instruction into the classroom. In order to get the best effectiveness, teachers need to take into accounts the appropriate difficulty level of materials, learners' reading level, length of the text, type of text as well as provide needed assistance so that learners find fluency practice interesting and meaningful.

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