



A KEY READING COMPONENT

Focus on Fluency Helps Develop Reading Comprehension

By Ludy Van Broekhuizen

Fluency may well be the most neglected and least understood of the five reading components defined in the U.S. Department of Education's Reading First initiative. The others – phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and reading comprehension – are all essential to skilled reading. But how does fluency fit into the equation? Research shows that fluency is critical to reading comprehension and that students who do not develop fluency may remain poor readers for the rest of their lives. Yet many students are not getting the instructional support they need to develop this crucial skill.

Fluency is the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with appropriate expression (*Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read*, available at www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/smallbook.htm). Fluency develops over an extended period of time through practice, and although fluency depends on well-developed word recognition skills, these skills by themselves do not inevitably lead to fluency. Other factors that affect fluency include the number of words a child can recognize and understand in print, the speed and accuracy with which the recognition process takes place, and the characteristics of the texts read.

When fluent readers read silently, they group words quickly, which not only helps them gain meaning from the text, but also makes it possible for them to read with expression. Expressiveness depends on the reader's ability to divide the text into meaningful chunks, like clauses and phrases. Fluent readers read aloud with ease, pausing appropriately within and at the ends of sentences and making suitable shifts in emphasis and tone. Their reading sounds natural, as if they are speaking.

At the earliest stages of reading development, students' oral reading is slow and labored. These students are just learning to "break the code," painstakingly attaching sounds to letters and then blending the letter sounds into recognizable words. Readers who have not yet developed fluency read slowly, word by word. Their oral reading is choppy and plodding. Even when these students recognize words automatically, their oral reading may still be expressionless, and therefore, not fluent (see *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*, available online at npin.org/library/2002/n00753/n00753.html).

The National Reading Panel encourages teachers to regularly assess student fluency. Procedures that can be used in the classroom include informal reading inventories, miscue analysis, pausing indices, running records, and reading speed calculations. For detailed information on assessment see *Put Reading First*.

Consistent, intensive intervention efforts can improve reading fluency; effective approaches include oral guided reading and repeated reading. Use of texts with repeated core vocabulary is also helpful. (See the sidebar for tips on helping young readers develop reading fluency).

Developing skilled readers is seldom easy, and the stakes are high for both students and teachers. Fluency is a key component of the reading process, with implications for comprehension as well. There is a great need for teachers to focus on this important component of reading.

Ludy van Broekhuizen is the Associate Director of the Regional Educational Laboratory at PREL. ★

Helping Your Students Develop Fluency

Repeated oral reading with feedback and guidance leads to meaningful improvements in reading expertise. Some ways in which you can help your students develop fluency:

- Pre-teach key vocabulary words and concepts critical to understanding the passage or text.
- Preview the text by having students listen to you reading the text aloud.
- Provide a variety of opportunities for students to read and reread the same text aloud. For example, have students read to an adult; conduct choral or group reading; use audiotapes and have students read with the tape; use buddy or partner reading where students read aloud to each other and talk about what they've read.
- Have students practice using a variety of word recognition skills. As students get older, this should include recognizing meanings tied to parts of words (e.g., knowing that the prefix "philos" means "love of").