Speed does matter in reading

Reading rate can be a tool for assessing students’ performance. Authentic instructional activities can then be woven into the reading program.

As a director of a university diagnostic reading clinic, I see children of all ages who, for one reason or another, are making poor progress in learning to read. Our job in the reading clinic is to determine the nature and source of the child’s reading problem and suggest (and implement) instructional interventions for helping the child improve. Often the children we see in our clinic demonstrate remarkable strengths. Many have excellent vocabularies; they know the meanings of many words. Others manage to read with few errors in word recognition. Still others often demonstrate high levels of comprehension, even when their oral reading of a passage is marked by a large number of uncorrected word recognition errors. One of the most common manifestations of reading problems in the children we see, however, is slow, disfluent, or what we have come to call inefficient reading. Even when these children have adequate comprehension of a passage, their reading is often characterized by slow, labored, inexpressive, and unenthusiastic rendering of a passage.

Wondering if this manifestation of slow reading among struggling readers is present in readers other than those seen in our reading clinic, my colleague Nancy Padak and I examined all the children in Grades 2 through 5 referred for Title I reading services by their teachers in the Akron, Ohio public schools—over 600 students (Rasinski & Padak, 1998). We asked these children to read a passage at their assigned grade level and one below their grade placement using standard informal reading inventory procedures. What we found surprised us.

The informal reading inventory criteria showed that students’ comprehension and word recognition were, on average, at their frustration level—but they were near the threshold for instructional-level reading. In other words, comprehension and word recognition were poor, but it wouldn’t take much improvement to move their performance to an instructional level. Reading rate, however, was a different story. When reading passages at their grade level, these students, who their teachers identified as struggling readers, read at a rate that was approximately 60% of their instructional level reading rate; for a passage below their grade level the rate was 50% (Rasinski, 1999). Clearly reading rate, or speed, was a significant factor in classroom teachers’ perceptions of their students’ proficiency or lack of proficiency in reading.

Excessively slow, disfluent reading leads to less overall reading

It is interesting and, to me, somewhat ironic that slow and labored reading rate may be a reason teachers see fit to recommend certain of their students for supplementary reading services such as Title I. Often when I speak with teachers about reading fluency I mention that reading rate may be an indicator of fluent or disfluent reading. This frequently results in concern expressed by some in the audience that reading rate or reading speed should not be considered a significant factor in reading. This concern is
often expressed in a comment like this: “As long as students understand what they read, as long as they are making meaning out of the text, reading rate should not matter.” While I certainly and absolutely agree that understanding what is read is the end game for reading, reading rate, or speed, cannot be ignored either as an indicator of reading fluency or, more precisely, as evidence of excessively slow processing of text. The simple fact that slow reading requires readers to invest considerably greater amounts of time in the reading task than classmates who are reading at a rate appropriate for their grade level should be a major cause for concern for all teachers.

Most of us would agree that reading progress is determined to a large extent by the amount of reading one does (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Postlethwaite & Ross, 1992). Slow readers, however, by definition, read fewer words per given amount of time than readers who read at more normal rates. Thus, just to keep up with their classmates in the amount of reading done, these slower readers have to invest considerably more time and energy in their reading.

Indeed, data from the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Pinnell et al., 1995) demonstrate a relationship between reading rate and fluency and self-selected reading in and out of school. The most fluent readers tended to be self-motivated, while less fluent readers were less likely to read in class or out of school. While the causal nature of this relationship has not been empirically established, it seems reasonable to assume that fluency in reading leads to greater reading and greater reading leads to gains in fluency—fluency and reading volume are cause and consequence of one another. (See Stanovich, 1985, for a more complete description of this phenomenon he termed the Matthew effect.)

**Excessively slow, disfluent reading is associated with poor comprehension**

Moreover, for most children, slow reading is associated with poor comprehension and poor overall reading performance. Research dating back over 60 years suggests that faster readers tend to have better comprehension over what is read and tend to be, overall, more proficient readers (Carver, 1990, Pinnell et al., 1995). The 1992 NAEP study found that 15% of all fourth graders (one out of seven) read “no faster than 74 words per minute...a pace at which it would be difficult to keep track of ideas as they are developing within the sentence and across the page” (Pinnell et al., 1995, p. 42). Indeed, the same 1992 NAEP study found that holistic ratings of reading fluency as well as fourth graders’ reading rates were associated with overall reading proficiency (Pinnell et al., 1995; White, 1995). Slow, disfluent reading, then, is linked with poor comprehension. This leads to students reading less, which in turn results in their making slower progress in reading than students who read at a more normal rate for their age or grade placement.

**Excessively slow reading leads to reading frustration**

Even at the classroom instruction level, slow reading has negative consequences. Imagine yourself as a fifth-grade student who is assigned to read a 12-page chapter in a social studies book in school. Imagine also that you are a disfluent or inefficient reader. You read at 58 words per minute (the average reading rate when reading grade level material of fifth graders referred for Title I support, Rasinski & Padak, 1998), or about half the rate of your classmates. You begin reading as best you can. Like most students, you are well aware of what is happening around you. You are about halfway through the passage, and you notice that many of your classmates have finished reading—they are done and you still have six pages to read. What do you do? Do you pretend to have completed the assignment even though you haven’t read or comprehended the entire passage? Or, do you continue reading knowing that by doing so you will be broadcasting your lack of reading proficiency and making your classmates wait on you? Neither solution is very palatable, yet the problem is all too common.

Even if an assignment were made for home reading, the 60-minute reading assignment for most students would become 2 hours of reading for you. Checking out of the reading club may be just around the corner. You may become a 9-year-old (one out of eight as reported by the NAEP) who claims never or hardly ever to read for fun. And if you don’t read, chances are your
progress in reading will continue to decelerate. Clearly, excessively slow and disfluent reading is an indicator of concern.

**Helping slow readers**

How do we help slow readers? Does slow inefficient reading require putting students into some sort of special regimen or treatment for increasing reading rate? Absolutely not. For most readers, a slow reading rate, one that lacks flow or fluency, suggests that the student is an inefficient reader. Although the student may have some success in decoding words, it is far from a smooth, automatic, and efficient process—the kind that requires little investment of attention or cognitive energy. The slow reader has to devote so much time and attention to decoding that overall reading pace is significantly reduced; moreover, cognitive resources that could have been used for comprehension must be reallocated to word recognition (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). As a result, comprehension suffers. Slow, disfluent reading may also be associated with a lack of sensitivity to meaningful phrasing and syntax (how words are ordered and organized in sentences within a passage) that also helps the reader construct the meaning of text (Schreiber, 1980).

Improving students’ word recognition efficiency and helping readers develop greater sensitivity to the syntactic nature of the text will result in more efficient reading and improved reading rate or fluency. But again, this does not have to be achieved through isolated skills practice or boring drills. Reading rate, efficiency, or fluency can be developed through instructional activities such as repeated readings, especially authentic ways, such as practicing poetry or scripts for later performance, and supported reading when it is done in activities where the reader reads an authentic text but is supported by a more fluent partner.

One key to nurturing fluent reading is finding the appropriate text for the reader to read. Texts that are too difficult, overly dense with unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts, can make any otherwise fluent reader disfluent (if you don’t believe this, try reading aloud an unfamiliar legal document or a selection from a textbook on nuclear physics). Thus, it is important that we find texts that are well within the reader’s independent-instructional range in order to promote fluency. Short, highly predictable selections that are meant to be read aloud and with expression, such as rhyming poetry, are ideal for reading fluency instruction.

Poetry and reading fluency are an excellent match in nearly any classroom and for all students. Integrating poetry into the reading curriculum is a great way to promote fluent reading through repeated reading of readable and intriguing texts. However, despite the wonderful potential of poetry to explore language, it is one of the most often neglected components of the language arts curriculum (Denman, 1988; Perfect, 1999). Turning poetry into a performance, which it is meant to be (Graves, 1992; Perfect, 1999), and turning away from too much critical analysis, can give poetry its rightful place in the reading-language arts curriculum. Moreover, when poetry performance is fostered in the classroom, reading fluency is also nurtured as students attempt to make their oral interpretations just right—and this means repeated readings, but in a very natural and purposeful way.

In some classrooms I have visited, teachers simply select a day for a poetry party. Several days prior to the event, students select a poem to learn from one of the poetry books and anthologies in the teacher’s personal collection or from a library, or they compose their own poem. Over the next several days students practice reading their poems, usually from a variety of perspectives, in preparation for the poetry party.

When the poetry party day finally arrives, the overhead lights in the classroom are dimmed, a lamp on the teacher’s desk is turned on, but apple cider and popcorn are served, and students take turns performing their poems for their classmates and other visitors. Students’ expressive and interpretive readings of their poems are responded to with warm applause (or, harkening back to a previous generation, with the snapping of fingers). I’ll never forget the cold, snowy day in January when a fourth grader gave a heartfelt rendition of The Cremation of Sam McGee (Service, 1907/1986). I can still feel the shivers it sent down my spine.

**Readers Theatre** is another very natural and authentic way to promote repeated readings. Readers Theatre does not rely on costumes, movement, props, or scenery to express meaning—just the performers and their voices as they face their audience with script in hand. For students to perform a Readers Theatre script in a
meaningful and engaging manner, they need to practice the script beforehand. Students love to perform for an audience when they are given sufficient opportunities to rehearse the script. In a 10-week implementation of Readers Theatre in which small groups of second-grade students were introduced to, practiced, and performed a new script each week, students made significant gains in reading rate and overall reading achievement as measured by an informal reading inventory (Martínez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999). Through the repeated readings inherent in preparation for Readers Theatre, students made an average rate gain of 17 words per minute, about the gain that could be expected in an entire year (Rasinski, 1999), while students engaged in more traditional reading activities made less than half the gain the Readers Theatre students experienced. In addition to its application in classroom settings, Rinehart (1999) found that Readers Theatre was a particularly effective and motivating approach for students experiencing reading difficulties.

Paired reading (Topping, 1987), echo reading, choral reading, and reading with talking books are ways to provide support for less fluent readers. Topping (1987), for example, found that paired reading could significantly accelerate students' reading fluency and overall proficiency. In our university reading clinic we ask parents of struggling readers to engage in a form of paired reading with their children for 10 to 15 minutes each evening. In our version of paired reading, parents read a brief poem or passage to their children. This is followed by the parent and child reading the text together several times. Finally, the child reads the text to the parent; the parent responds to the child's reading with enthusiastic and authentic praise for a job well done. We have found that children who engage in this form of paired reading make significant gains (in as little as 5 weeks) over children who receive clinical tutoring without the parental paired reading support (Rasinski, 1995). Similar types of paired and supported reading done in the classroom with less fluent readers have been found to result in improvements in reading rate and overall reading achievement (Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Stutevant, 1994).

Buddy reading is another excellent example of how teachers can create complex instructional scenarios that are engaging, authentic, and lead to gains in fluency. Let's look at a third grader who is having trouble reading. We know that repeated readings lead to fluency gains (Samuels, 1979). We also know that supported reading in the form of paired reading will also lead to gains in fluency, word recognition, and comprehension (Topping, 1987). This child's third-grade teacher, cognizant of his struggle with fluency, decides, with the child's permission, to pair this third grader with a second grader who is also having difficulty in reading. The third grader will meet with the second grader twice a week and read with her a passage from one of the second grader's textbooks for about 20 minutes. In anticipation of each meeting, the third grader needs to

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Teachers need to be aware of children's needs and plan accordingly with instruction that meets those needs.

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practice the assigned passage (which will be somewhat easier for the third grader to read because it is at a difficulty level appropriate for the second grader) so that he can read it with accuracy and expression with his partner. This may require two or three or more readings of the passage. Yet the third grader does so enthusiastically, for he has a real reason to practice.

When the partners read, first the third grader reads the passage to his partner, then they read it together once or twice, and then, if time allows, the second grader reads it while the partner follows along and provides support and encouragement. The practice is natural and the outcome is clear. Through repeated readings of somewhat easier texts the third grader makes significant strides in his reading fluency and overall reading. The second grader, with the additional modeled and paired reading support, makes significant gains in her reading as well.

The opportunities to create authentic and engaging reading instruction that meets the needs of all readers, but especially inefficient and disfluent readers, are enormous. Creative and informed teachers have been designing reading

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instruction that meets the needs of their students for years. We need to empower all teachers to do the same. Teachers need to be aware of children's needs and plan accordingly with instruction that meets those needs. Slow, disfluent reading is one indication of a problem for a significant number of young readers.

The goal in fluency instruction is not fast reading, although that often happens to be a byproduct of the instruction, but fluent and meaning-filled reading. To this end I have found that reading to students is a wonderful way to model the connection between fluent reading and meaningful reading. Often I will read to students in meaningful and expressive a voice as possible. Then, after I have read the selection and discussed its meaning with students, I will draw their attention to my reading of the passage. I will ask them to remember how I read the passage and how my expressiveness affected their understanding. "What did that long pause in my reading make you think? What happened when I read this part in a soft voice? How did my reading this section fast and loud affect how you understood this part of the story? And when I read these words very slow and deliberately, what did that do for you?" Sometimes I will read a poem or text from various points of view: as if I am angry, as if I am calm, or as if I am nervous. Then I will discuss with students how the expression I embedded in the words helped to communicate to the listener my own point of view. This sort of reading and discussion helps students develop a metacognitive understanding that the meaning of a passage is not carried only in the words, but also in the way the words are presented to the reader. It also provides a model for students' own meaningful, expressive, and contextualized reading, whether orally to an audience or silently with that inner voice that is heard only by the reader.

Reading to students and discussing the nature of the reading allows us to focus on the flexible attitude readers need to bring to the reading act. Fluent and understandable reading, not fast reading, is the goal of our instruction. Fluent reading is often quick paced, but not always. Sometimes, especially with difficult, technical, expository, or unfamiliar content texts, readers need to slow down and process texts more deliberately. Reading these more challenging passages to students and discussing their understanding helps students realize that a truly fluent reader is one who is able to adjust his or her reading rate according to the challenge posed by the text and the information the reader needs to get from the text.

Do not ignore reading rate

I do not wish to take anything away from comprehension as the desired and ultimate result of reading and reading instruction. Rather, the point I am hoping to make is that we need to take the notion of slow, inefficient, disfluent reading seriously. Even with adequate comprehension, slow and labored reading will turn any school or recreational reading assignment into a marathon of frustration for nearly any student.

A slow reading rate may be symptomatic of inefficient word recognition or lack of sensitivity to the phrase—the natural unit of meaning in reading. But these problems can be addressed through authentic and engaging instructional activities and routines that can be woven seamlessly into the regular reading curriculum and that are appropriate for all students, not just those identified as disfluent. As reading teachers, diagnosticians, and specialists, we need to be aware of the importance of reading rate as a diagnostic indicator and to use reading rate as one of many tools for assessing students’ overall reading performance. To ignore reading rate when assessing children’s reading and designing appropriate instruction may do a major disservice to many readers who struggle with reading.

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References


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Measuring Students’ Accuracy

Reading levels can be determined by calculating the student’s accuracy when reading text.

1. Calculate the percent accuracy level.

Divide the number of words read correctly by the total number of words read to calculate the percent accuracy level.

\[
\frac{\text{number of words read correctly}}{\text{total words read}} = \text{percent accuracy}
\]

For example, if a student reads 120 words correctly out of a passage of text that contains 125 words, the accuracy level is 96%.

\[
\frac{120}{125} = (0.96) \quad 96\%
\]

2. Determine the reading level of the text for the student.

A 96% accuracy means that the text is at the student’s independent reading level.

Practice

Calculate the percent accuracy to determine a second grader’s reading level:

In September, a second-grade student reads 69 words correctly out of a passage of text that contains 75 words. What is the percent accuracy and reading level?

\[
\frac{\_\_\_}{\_\_\_} = (\_.\_) \_\_\_\% \quad (\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ level)
\]

### A Closer Look at Reading Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>*Accuracy Level</th>
<th>Purpose for Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent level</strong></td>
<td>Texts in which no more than approximately 1 in 20 words is difficult for the reader</td>
<td>95 – 100%</td>
<td>Students are reading independently with little or no instructional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional level</strong></td>
<td>Texts in which no more than approximately 1 in 10 words is difficult for the reader</td>
<td>90 – 94%</td>
<td>Small-group instruction (including pairs) when teachers or others provide assistance before, during, and after reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frustrational level</strong></td>
<td>Texts in which more than 1 in 10 words are difficult for the reader</td>
<td>less than 90%</td>
<td>Only when extensive support and instruction are provided by the teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Reading accuracy levels vary from source to source.
Calculating Reading Fluency

Reading fluency is calculated by taking the total number of words read in one minute and subtracting the number of errors. Only count one error per word.

This gives you the words correct per minute (WCPM). The words correct per minute represent students’ fluency scores.

One-Minute Reading

total words read – errors = words correct per minute (WCPM)

Example:
If a student reads 53 words and has 7 errors in one minute, the student has 46 words correct per minute (WCPM).

Always encourage students to do their best reading, not their fastest reading.

This reminder helps students understand that the purpose is to read well even though you are timing them.

When students read the entire passage, fluency scores can be calculated following these steps:

Step 1: Calculate words read correctly:

\[
\text{total # of words read} - \text{errors} = \text{words read correctly}
\]

Step 2: Calculate words per minute:

\[
\text{total # of words read correctly} \times 60 = \text{WCPM}
\]

Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI)
Second Grade
Screening Summary

Student: **Michael**

Beginning of the Year Administration Date: **9/6/08**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Concept Assessed</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Decision Criteria</th>
<th>Developed</th>
<th>Still Developing</th>
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<td>Screening 1</td>
<td>Word Identification</td>
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<td>5 or more correct - Developed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 or less correct - Still Developing</td>
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# Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI)
## 2TRA: Fluency
### Second Grade
#### Inventory Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Concept Assessed</th>
<th>Decision Criteria</th>
<th>Beginning of the Year (Score)</th>
<th>Developed</th>
<th>Still Developing</th>
<th>Middle of the Year (Score)</th>
<th>Developed</th>
<th>Still Developing</th>
<th>End of the Year (Score)</th>
<th>Developed</th>
<th>Still Developing</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Spelling of CVC and CVCe Words</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Spelling of Long Vowels</td>
<td>4 or more correct - Developed 3 or less correct - Still Developing</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Orthographic Patterns, Conventions and Past Tense</td>
<td>4 or more correct - Developed 3 or less correct - Still Developing</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Orthographic Patterns, Conventions and Infinitual Endings</td>
<td>4 or more correct - Developed 3 or less correct - Still Developing</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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### Comprehension of Initial Story Placement

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<tr>
<th>Time of Year</th>
<th>Word List Score (0-15)</th>
<th>Story Administered</th>
<th>Listening Comprehension (if needed)</th>
<th>Reading Accuracy Level</th>
<th>Reading Fluency Rate</th>
<th>Comprehension Questions Correct Explicit/Implicit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>3/15</td>
<td>Story (15) Grade (K2)</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Independent Instructional Frustrational</td>
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<td>End of the Year</td>
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### Comprehension of Alternative Story (if additional story was needed)

<table>
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<th>Time of Year</th>
<th>Word List Score (0-15)</th>
<th>Story Administered</th>
<th>Listening Comprehension (if needed)</th>
<th>Reading Accuracy Level</th>
<th>Reading Fluency Rate</th>
<th>Comprehension Questions Correct Explicit/Implicit</th>
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<td>7/15</td>
<td>Story (15) Grade (K2)</td>
<td>Reading</td>
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<td>End of the Year</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Suggestions for Setting Short-Term Goals

After administering the benchmark (or screening) assessment, you can use the students’ scores to set short-term goals. Short-term goals help students see weekly progress.

At the beginning of the school year, a second-grader’s fluency score is 42 words correct per minute (WCPM).

- Calculate the amount of improvement needed to meet the benchmark.

  If the end-of-year fluency benchmark is 90 WCPM, the second grader needs a minimum improvement of 48 WCPM to meet the benchmark.

  \[
  90 \text{ WCPM} - 42 \text{ WCPM} = 48 \text{ WCPM}
  \]

- Determine the number of weeks remaining in the semester and/or school year to help set realistic, attainable goals for your students.

  There are 33 weeks of instruction remaining in the school year.

- Determine a weekly (or biweekly) goal to help students improve to meet an end-of-the-year benchmark.

  If the second-grader needs to improve his fluency score by at least 48 WCPM by the end of the year, he needs to increase his fluency rate approximately 1.5 WCPM each week to meet the benchmark.

  \[
  48 \text{ WCPM} \div 33 \text{ weeks} = 1.45 \text{ WCPM gain per week}
  \]

Findings from a 1993 research study can help teachers establish appropriate goals for weekly fluency improvement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Weekly Word Gain</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2–3 words</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5–2 words</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0–1.5 words</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.5–1.0 words</td>
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## Oral Reading Fluency Norms 2005

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<tr>
<th>GRADE</th>
<th>PERCENTILE</th>
<th>FALL WCPM</th>
<th>WINTER WCPM</th>
<th>SPRING WCPM</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>111</td>
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<td>47</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WCPM: Words correct per minute
If appropriate, compare students’ scores to curriculum-based norms to help determine the intensity and type of instruction needed to help students meet benchmarks.

After two weeks of fluency instruction, the second-grader has gained 7 WCPM. He has surpassed the weekly goal of 1.5 WCPM. His fluency rate is now 49 WCPM. Based on the chart below, this student is in the bottom half of the second grade. Although he is improving his fluency, he continues to need immediate intervention to help him meet the benchmark.

If not already established, set a mid-year benchmark to help monitor students’ progress toward the end-of-year benchmark.

The second-grader’s mid-year fluency goal would be approximately 64 WCPM.

15 weeks remaining in semester x 1.5 WCPM gain per week = 22.5 WCPM

42 WCPM + 22.5 WCPM = 64.5 WCPM
Graphing Student Progress

- Graph student progress for targeted skills. Indicate baseline scores and benchmarks. Draw a line connecting the points on the graph to show the course a student needs to make to achieve end-of-the-year benchmarks.

The second grader would need to progress at this slope of improvement to achieve the benchmark of 90 wcpm by the end of the school year. As scores are graphed throughout the year, the teacher and student can see if he is on track based on where the scores fall along the aimline.


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Fluency Monitoring Over Time

Name: ______________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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Monitoring Reading Fluency

Materials:
Two copies of text (one for recording errors and one for the student to read)
Optional: Stopwatch and tape recorder

Procedure:
1. Say: When I say begin, start reading at the top of the page.
   Read across the page. (Demonstrate by pointing.)
   Try to read each word.
   If you come to a word you don’t know, I will tell it to you.
   Do your best reading.
   Are there any questions?

2. Say: Begin.

3. Start timing when the student begins reading aloud. If students “speed” read, stop
   and remind them: “Remember, do your best reading, not your fastest reading.”

4. Follow along on your copy. Put a slash (/) through words read incorrectly:
   • Substitutions
   • Mispronunciations
   • Omissions
   • Hesitations > 3 seconds (Say the word for the student.)
   • Reversals

5. Do not count as errors:
   • Insertions
   • Repetitions
   • Self-corrections

6. Stop timing at the end of one minute.

7. Mark the last word read by the student. You may allow the student to finish reading
   to the end of the passage.

Adapted from Bos, C. S., & Vaughn, S. (2002). Strategies for teaching students with learning and behavior problems
norms for students in grades two through five. Teaching Exceptional Children, 24(3), 41–44; Reutzel, D. R., & Cooter,
Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Marking Fluency Errors

**Directions:**
Read the text below and how the student misread it. Write the letter for the error the student made. Then decide if the error is counted in the fluency measure.

A. Mispronunciation  
B. Substitution  
C. Insertion  
D. Repetition  
E. Reversal  
F. Hesitation  
G. Self-correction  
H. Omission  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT</th>
<th>HOW MISREAD</th>
<th>KIND OF ERROR</th>
<th>IS ERROR COUNTED?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>She saw a cat.</td>
<td>She saw a scary cat.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see the worm.</td>
<td>I see the word.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He went to town.</td>
<td>He went to tent . . . town. (changed within 3 seconds)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see a bird.</td>
<td>I see a birb.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He had a beach ball.</td>
<td>He had a beach ball, a beach ball.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was walking in a park.</td>
<td>I saw walking in a park.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like his kindness.</td>
<td>I like his . . . (3-second pause)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She went to school.</td>
<td>She went school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Marking Fluency Errors

## Answer Key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT</th>
<th>HOW MISREAD</th>
<th>KIND OF ERROR</th>
<th>IS ERROR COUNTED?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>She saw a cat.</td>
<td>She saw a scary cat.</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see the worm.</td>
<td>I see the word.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He went to town.</td>
<td>He went to tent . . . town.</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see a bird.</td>
<td>I see a birb.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He had a beach ball.</td>
<td>He had a beach ball, a beach ball.</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was walking in a park.</td>
<td>I saw walking in a park.</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like his kindness.</td>
<td>I like his . . . (3-second pause)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She went to school.</td>
<td>She went school.</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measuring Reading Fluency: Practice

Hi! I’m Little Bill. This is a story about a boat that I made all by myself. I named it The Moby Dick.

One Saturday morning, I woke up and saw that it was bright and sunny outside. Hurray! I could go with my brother to the park and sail my new boat.

Total number of words read: ___
Number of errors: ___
Words correct per minute (WCPM): ___
Reading accuracy: (words read correctly/ total words read = ) ___%  

“Shipwreck Saturday” is at Michael’s ________________ reading level.

Measuring Reading Fluency: Answer Key

Hi! I’m Little Bill. This is a story about a boat that I made all by myself. I named it *The Moby Dick.*

One Saturday morning, I woke up and saw that it was bright and sunny outside. Hurray! I could go with my brother to the park and sail my new boat.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of words read:</th>
<th>53</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of errors:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words correct per minute (WCPM):</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading accuracy: (words read correctly/ total words read = )</td>
<td>92%</td>
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</table>

“Shipwreck Saturday” is at Michael’s Instructional reading level.

Oral Reading Fluency Norms

Grade Two (Medians)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>PERCENTILE</th>
<th>FALL WORD COUNT PER MINUTE</th>
<th>WINTER WORD COUNT PER MINUTE</th>
<th>SPRING WORD COUNT PER MINUTE</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted Version of NAEP’s Oral Reading Fluency Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Reads primarily in larger, meaningful phrase groups. Although some regressions, repetitions, and deviations from text may be present, these do not appear to detract from the overall structure of the story. Preservation of the author’s syntax is consistent. Some or most of the story is read with expressive interpretation.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrase groups. Some small groupings may be present. However, the majority of phrasing seems appropriate and preserves the syntax of the author. Little or no expressive interpretation is present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Reads primarily in two-word phrases with some three- or four-word groupings. Some word-by-word reading may be present. Word groupings may seem awkward and unrelated to larger context of sentence or passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Reads primarily word-by-word. Occasional two-word or three-word phrases may occur—but these are infrequent and/or they do not preserve meaningful syntax.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Partner Reading

- Partner reading involves pairing students to practice rereading texts.
- Partner reading increases the amount of time students are reading and enhances fluency.
- Pair high-performing readers with lower-performing readers for fluency practice.
- One example of pairing is to split the class in half. The higher-performing (HP) half is paired with the lower-performing (LP) half. The top-ranked HP student is paired with the top-ranked LP student. The same pairing is done for the remaining students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Pairs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top-ranked HP</td>
<td>Top-ranked LP</td>
<td>Pair A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-ranked HP</td>
<td>Second-ranked LP</td>
<td>Pair B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-ranked HP</td>
<td>Third-ranked LP</td>
<td>Pair C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Provide reading material at the lower-performing student’s instructional reading level.

One easy way to match books to students’ reading levels is to give the students a list of words from the text. If students have difficulty with no more than approximately 1 in 10 words, the text is considered to be at their instructional level.

Independent-level text can also be used.

- Model and explain partner reading procedures before students begin the process of reading together.

An Example of Partner Reading

1. **Assign roles to student pairs:**
   a. Partner A (stronger reader)
   b. Partner B (lower-performing reader)
   (Do not explain to students why they are A or B.)

2. **Give each student a copy of the reading text.** The text matches the reading level of Partner B.

3. **Students take turns reading.**
   a. Partner A reads the text aloud (modeling fluent reading) for 1 minute. Partner B follows along.
   b. Partner B reads aloud the SAME text for 1 minute.

When using this procedure, the whole class can participate while you time the readings.
Variation: Students alternate reading pages, rather than reading for a specific time. This procedure is often used while the teacher is working with other students or teaching a small reading group.

4. After both students have read, they can take turns checking their comprehension. Cue cards can be developed for students to use.

Sample After-Reading Comprehension Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What will happen next?</th>
<th>Did your prediction(s) come true?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell what happened first.</td>
<td>Tell what happened next.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell how the story ended.</td>
<td>Tell the most important thing about the main character in ten words or less (count words on fingers).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Providing Instructional Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompts to help students notice errors</th>
<th>Prompts to help students find errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Check to see if that looks/sounds right.  
There is a tricky word on this line.  
You’re nearly right.  
Try that again.  
Try it another way.  
You’ve almost got that. See if you can find what is wrong. | Find the part that’s not right.  
Look carefully to see what’s wrong.  
You noticed something was wrong.  
Where is the part that’s not right?  
What made you stop?  
Can you find the problem spot? |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompts to help students fix errors</th>
<th>Prompts to help students write words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What do you hear first? Next? Last?  
What word starts with those letters?  
Do you think it looks/sounds like/_______?  
What does an e do at the end of a word?  
What do you know that might help?  
What could you try?  
You said _______. Does that make sense?  
Can you think of a better way to say ________? (Repeat what child said.) | You have only one letter to change.  
That sounds right, but does it look right?  
One more letter will make it right.  
It starts like that. Now check the last part.  
Did you write all the sounds you hear?  
Did you write a vowel for each syllable?  
What do you hear first? Next? Last?  
It starts/ends like ____.  
There’s a silent letter in that word. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompts of encouragement</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| I like the way you worked that out.  
The results are worth all your hard work.  
You’ve come a long way with this one.  
That was some quick thinking.  
That looks like an impressive piece of work.  
You’re right on target.  
You’re on the right track now.  
That’s an interesting way of looking at it.  
Now you’ve figured it out.  
That’s quite an improvement.  
That is quite an accomplishment. | That’s a powerful argument.  
That’s coming along.  
You’re really settling down to work.  
You’ve shown a lot of patience with this.  
You’ve been paying close attention.  
You’ve put in a full day today.  
I knew you could finish it.  
You make it look so easy.  
You’ve really tackled that assignment.  
This shows you’ve been thinking/working.  
It looks like you’ve put a lot of work into this. |


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"I never thought I could be a star": A Readers Theatre ticket to fluency

Readers Theatre is a great way to develop children's meaningful and fluent reading. Here's the story of two classrooms that took Readers Theatre to new heights.

Engaged and fluent reading performances, like the one in which Juanita participated, came from children who weeks before read haltingly and without confidence. For 10 weeks, their language arts instruction included daily Readers Theatre experiences aimed toward increasing the children's oral reading fluency. Because their practices were "rehearsals," rereadings were both purposeful and fun. At the end of the 10 weeks, these second graders had made reading gains that were significantly greater than students in comparison classrooms.

As many teachers know, Readers Theatre is an interpretive reading activity in which readers use their voices to bring characters to life. Unlike conventional theater, Readers Theatre requires no sets, costumes, props, or memorized lines. Rather, the performer's goal is to read a script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action. Besides the characters, the narrator has a special role in Readers Theatre. Narrators provide the cementing details and explanations that may be found in the original text's narration, descriptions, or even illustrations. Although we realized Readers Theatre has been used to encourage students' appreciation of literature and eagerness to read, we were interested in the influence of Readers Theatre on the fluency of second-grade students who need more practice to make their hesitant reading more fluid.
Defining fluency

Although most teachers have fluency as one of their goals for children’s reading, they frequently find it a struggle to explain what fluency is. As one teacher observed, “I don’t know how to define it, but I know it when I hear it.” Others offer explanations that are logical, yet incomplete: “Fluency is reading at a good pace.” “Fluent reading is reading without errors.” “It’s reading with expression.”

Even investigators who have looked closely at oral reading fluency don’t seem to agree. Some have inspected rate (e.g., Chomsky, 1976; Dahl & Samuels, 1974). Some have broadened the lens to include accuracy as well as rate in their inspections of fluency (e.g., LaBerge & Samuels, 1979). Still others have looked at phrasing (e.g., Schreiber, 1980) or the use of prosodic features such as pitch, stress, pauses, and expressiveness (e.g., Dowhower, 1987; Herman, 1985). We considered each of these indicators when we inspected fluency. If demonstration of fluency depends upon appropriate rate, accuracy, phrasing, and expression, we wondered whether Readers Theatre had potential to orchestrate all these fluency components.

What fluency instruction looks like

There are both logical arguments and observational evidence that Readers Theatre can support instruction in reading fluency. That is, the individual instructional features of Readers Theatre have already been associated with growth in fluency both in studies and teachers’ testimonies.

Access to manageable materials. Students who are becoming fluent readers need manageable texts in which to practice (Allington, 1983; Rasinski, 1989; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991). The reading selection itself is an important element in building fluency. First, it’s important to choose texts for Readers Theatre that are within the reader’s reach. By definition, text within a reader’s instructional range reduces word recognition demands and allows for more rapid reading. As rate increases, the reader is able to devote more attention to meaning and the interpretation of meaning through phrasing and expressiveness. That is,
accuracy, rate, phrasing, and expressiveness are all depressed when the text is too difficult.

Second, work within the world of oral interpretation suggests that stories with certain features are more easily adapted to Readers Theatre. Stories with straightforward plots that present characters grappling with dilemmas requiring thought and talk can easily be turned into scripts. For example, a strong script is likely to result from a story like Marc Brown’s *Arthur Babysits* in which the main character grapples with an ethical dilemma. By contrast, a story like Alexei Tolstoy’s *The Great Big Enormous Turnip* with sprawling, boisterous action begs for enactment; it almost demands that children form a chain to pull up that turnip rather than read the story from stools at the front of the room.

---

By listening to good models of fluent reading, students can hear how a reader’s voice makes text make sense.

---

Third, Readers Theatre can also build on children’s enthusiasm for series books. Feitelson, Kita, and Goldstein (1986) found that familiar story characters and settings are more easily grasped and better understood by young children. Similarly, if children meet the same characters in script after script, those characters become much like friends who have shared many different experiences. They can anticipate those recurring characters’ reactions—even to new situations. When it’s time to step into those characters’ shoes, the children’s portrayals of the characters become increasingly believable.

**Effective reading models.** To know what fluent reading “sounds like,” students need to hear effective models (e.g., Bear & Cathey, 1989; Eldredge, 1990; Hoffman, 1987). Sometimes teachers request, “Read that again with expression,” but children don’t always know what expressive reading is. By listening to good models of fluent reading, students can hear how a reader’s voice makes text make sense. That understanding, more than exaggerated voice inflection, is the basis for expressiveness. When teachers read aloud the stories on which Readers Theatre scripts are based, teachers guide students into the sounds and meanings of those stories.

**Rereadings.** Students who have opportunities for repeatedly reading the same texts become fluent (e.g., Dahl & Samuels, 1974; Dowhower, 1987; Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1993). Teachers have understood for a long time that reading stories repeatedly improves fluency (as in Samuels, 1979). Chall (1983) argues that children at about second-grade level choose to read repeatedly for the sheer joy of becoming proficient. No longer glued to print, they “take off” in reading. People who observe these readers note their love of riddles and jokes and almost any kind of text that lends itself to being read aloud often. Hickman (1979) found that second and third graders were far less likely to want to talk about stories than younger or older children because they were so intent on practicing their craft. As 7-year-old Erin explained it, “It’s like getting the training wheels off your bicycle. You just ride and ride and ride. Now I got reading. I just read and read and read.”

**Instructional support and feedback.** Students who receive instruction and feedback are more likely to develop reading fluency (Koskinen & Blum, 1986; Rasinski, 1989). Students can gain insights into how to become more fluent readers by talking with their teachers and peers about how good readers sound. Immature readers sometimes describe good reading as “knowing every word” or “reading fast.” With guidance, they come to understand that good oral reading also involves bringing the text to life by producing a defensible interpretation. Guidance can occur informally as teacher and children talk about a just-completed performance, or it can be a more planned demonstration of a strategy that fluent readers use.

**Into the classroom with Readers Theatre**

Given what we understood about fluency instruction, we introduced an instructional model for 30-minute daily sessions in Readers Theatre. The two second-grade classes that participated in the project were in inner-city
school districts. One class was composed of Hispanic children of low socioeconomic status; the other was an ethnically mixed group from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

Choosing the texts. Because the children in each classroom were at a range of reading levels, we looked for books of varying difficulty level, so that each child could meet with text within his or her instructional range. We looked for a body of works—a series—with interesting characters who meet ponderable dilemmas to ensure that children would come to know the characters well and thoroughly. We wanted texts that would provide a sufficient number (four or five) of recurring roles. In addition, we sought humorous texts.

For the lower level readers in the two classes, we chose Marshall’s Fox series (for example, Fox on Stage, Fox in Love). The mid-range readers read scripts based on Marc Brown’s Arthur series. We didn’t find a series that seemed a perfect fit with the upper level readers in the two classrooms, so we chose, instead, a set of related books—tongue-in-cheek fairy tales written or illustrated by James Marshall (e.g., Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella). We knew this meant that the best second-grade readers in these classes wouldn’t be meeting the same characters repeatedly (as would the other students), but the books they read were stylistically similar and the tales themselves were familiar ones. As soon as the groups were formed, they became three “repertory companies” and carried that designation throughout the project.

Preparing the scripts. The books were re-cast as Readers Theatre scripts with only these changes: Brief narration was added when necessary to describe story action revealed only by an illustration. Long narrations were sometimes divided into two speaking parts (Narrators 1 and 2). A portion of a script appears in Figure 1.

For every book we made two copies of each script for each child. The first copy was carried home so that each child could practice each of the speaking parts throughout the week. The second copy, the “at-school” copy, had each character’s speaking parts highlighted with neon markers. Teachers collected these second copies at the end of each day’s practice session. During the week’s rehearsals, children would pass along both the script and the role they had just read. Once the performance day’s role was decided upon, however, they held on to the script with their own lines highlighted.

Organizing the repertory groups. The three repertory groups were organized in each classroom and each group read scripts based on texts written at appropriate levels of difficulty. Like real repertory companies, the players faced the challenge of regularly rehearsing new material (in this case, each week). The groups had a practice routine, and each player was asked to take on different roles each week. In some instances, a player even had to take on more than one part in a production. Again, like real repertory groups, the players knew they were rehearsing for a real audience. The companies staked their rehearsal areas in the corners of the classrooms. Their weekly instructional and performance routines are described in the sections that follow.

The weekly routine. Every Monday morning, the children looked forward to hearing their teacher read three new stories aloud. These were the stories on which the week’s Readers Theatre scripts would be based. Because the teacher had practiced each story, as each was read aloud, the teacher made a special effort to interpret it in ways that would bring the story to life. After the second graders talked about the content and meaning of the stories, the teacher presented a minilesson designed to demonstrate and make explicit some aspect of fluent reading. For example, one lesson focused on why and when a good reader might need to slow down or speed up. In another, students discussed how a reader uses the

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circumstances a character faces to decide how to convey that character's feelings. As a result of those lessons, when Maria played the role of Arthur in Marc Brown's *Arthur Meets the President*, her interpretation of Arthur's speech at the White House began slowly and painfully, "Good afternoon, Mr. President. When I think...about...what...I...can...do...to...make America...great...ah, ah, ah..." Maria explained her slow reading: "I know Arthur is embarrassed. He can't remember what he wants to say. Everyone is looking at him. Arthur hates that. His words are stuck."

Following the minilesson, the teacher distributed copies of the three scripts to the repertory groups. The students practiced reading the scripts either independently or with a buddy. At the end of the session, the children were encouraged to take their copy of the script home to do more practicing that night and through the week.

The anticipation of an audience is what made reading practice seem like a dress rehearsal.

Feedback also came from other players and felt much like the collaboration found in Author's Chair: "Here's what I liked about the way Jazz read Arthur's part..." Scripts continued to be read and passed until the end of the session.

Wednesday's routines were exactly like Tuesday's. That is, students rehearsed by reading the highlighted part and then exchanging scripts to practice another role. In the final 5 minutes of the session, signaled by the teacher, students in each repertory company learned to negotiate and quickly determine roles for Friday's audience performance. The teacher encouraged the children to pay special attention to their performance role when they practiced their at-home copy of the script.

On Thursday, students spent the session working together reading and rereading their performance roles in preparation for the next day's production. During the final few minutes, students sometimes made character labels and discussed where each would stand during Readers' Theatre performance.

By Friday, each performer was ready, having, on average, read the script or the story 15–20 times. Every week each repertory group performed before a live audience. The audience varied; some weeks the repertory groups read in other classrooms. Parents were sometimes invited for the performance. The principal, school librarian, or counselor were frequently in the audience. At other times, the class itself served as audience, as one repertory company read in front of the other two groups. There was great anticipation as to who the week's audience would be. The children themselves made lots of eager suggestions. "The audience effect was important," explained Ms. Carter, one of the teachers who participated in the study. "The anticipation of an audience is what made reading practice seem like a dress rehearsal."

As for "classroom management," the children settled fairly rapidly into the routines of their repertory group. At first, there were some warm exchanges about coveted roles, even though teachers made it clear that everyone would play every role, and that continuing roles would be rotated. Manuscript passing, role assignment, and turn-taking soon became routine. Like the procedures for Author's Chair, the routines for repertory groups (see
**Figure 2**

* A 5-day Instructional plan for Readers Theatre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre Day 1</th>
<th>Teacher chooses stories and develops scripts for each text.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 1</td>
<td>• Teacher models fluency by reading aloud the stories on which the week’s scripts are based.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher offers a brief minilesson that presents explicit explanation of some aspect of fluency.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The teacher and students discuss each of the three stories.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Students begin to practice reading personal copies of scripts, reading all the parts independently.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Teacher encourages students to take these unmarked scripts home for further practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Day 2</td>
<td>• Students gather in repertory groups. Teacher provides scripts for each group with specific parts highlighted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Students read the script, taking a different part with each reading.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher circulates among the three repertory groups, coaching and providing feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 3</td>
<td>• Procedures are the same as for Day 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• During the final 5 minutes, students within each repertory group negotiate and assign roles for Day 5’s performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher encourages children to pay special attention to their newly assigned performance role when practicing at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 4</td>
<td>• Students read and reread the parts to which they are assigned within their repertory groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• During the final 10 minutes, students make character labels and discuss where each will stand during the performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 5</td>
<td>• Repertory groups “perform,” reading before an audience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2) became automatic, so that the focus moved toward smoothing the performance, as well as on enjoyment and showmanship.

**What children gained from Readers Theatre**

We made pre- and postassessments of students’ oral readings of unrehersed stories from the same or similar series we had used in the repertory groups. Over the 10-week project, nearly all of the children posted gains in their rate of reading. Some of these gains were dramatic. For example, Victoria read her pre-project text at 74 words per minute. By the end of the project, she read at 125 words per minute. Similarly, Rebecca’s rate grew from 40 to 88 words per minute. Overall, there was an average rate increase of 17 words per minute for these second graders, while two similar classes of second graders who had the series books in their classroom libraries, but no Readers Theatre, gained an average of 6.9 words per minute. Even so, Readers Theatre experiences didn’t affect the rate of every child. We puzzled over Patricia, for example, whose rate stayed exactly the same over the 10-week period. Hashbuck and Tindal (1992) hold that 78 words per minute is an expected rate for second graders. Given that standard, 76% of our group fell below at the outset, yet at the end of 10 weeks, 75% had approached or exceeded the standard.

Gains in accuracy told us less. That may be because the materials “fit” the students at the outset. Each student’s accuracy was already at an acceptable—or instructional—level. They got better, but there was little room to show accuracy growth in these texts. There were also gains in reading levels on the Informal Reading Inventories administered prior to the beginning of the project and at the project’s end. For the children for whom all data were available, 9 gained two grade levels, and 14 gained one grade level. Only 5 children showed no reading level gain. Across the hall, in the two comparison classrooms, 3 children gained two grade levels; 13 gained one grade level, and 12 showed no gain in reading level.

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We used a 5-point scale to rate students' fluidity, phrasing, and expressiveness of oral reading on the pre- and postassessments. This analysis documented improvement for all but 4 of the children. The remaining children improved in at least one facet of oral reading fluency, with most improving in two or even three facets. In comparison groups, 10 of the 28 children showed no improvement in oral reading fluency. The children who did show growth typically did so in only one facet of fluency (e.g., phrasing).

Readers Theatre seemed especially well suited to helping children go “inside” the story, experiencing the thoughts and feelings of the characters. As we observed in the two classrooms, we witnessed many instances of this. Sometimes a teacher probe assisted students in contemplating the meaning of a scene: "How is James Marshall's Goldilocks different from other Goldilocks? How can the voice of Goldilocks give the audience a clue to that difference?" At other times students themselves initiated discussion regarding oral interpretation that delved into comprehension on a deep level, as evidenced in this interaction about Hansel and Gretel (Marshall, 1990).

Vicky: Your voice is too sweet. I don’t think Gretel would talk nice to her stepmother.

Jessica: That’s what I’m doing. Gretel is being too sweet because she can’t stand her. I want it to sound like phony, not like I’m really trying to be nice.

As expected, we found that the series books promoted familiarity with characters’ personas. For example, Arthur’s friend Francine was interpreted as a know-it-all smarty pants every week, regardless of the performer. Children also learned to expect certain types of story situations to occur in the series books. Leaving the classroom one Friday afternoon, Daniel called back, “I can’t, wait to see what trouble Fox gets in next week!” Such expectations for story can serve as a solid basis for interpreting future stories through Readers Theatre.

The teachers, Ms. Carter and Mr. Meneses, also attended to their students’ enthusiasm for Readers Theatre. Reading practice as “rehearsal” proved to be a motivational method to encourage repeated readings. The “lure of performance” (Busching, 1981, p. 34) offered an incentive for returning to the text again and again, as students worked to bring the written

Books for use in Readers Theatre

<table>
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<th>Easy books</th>
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Books for average readers


Challenging books


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words to life for Friday’s audience. Ms. Carter explained the pervading influence of the scripts in classroom life: “They read those [original] books during their reading time. They wrote about the books and their own plays based on the same characters. They wrote story extensions of the scripts. They also invited their parents to attend performances and repeatedly asked, ‘Is it time for Readers Theatre?’” We found further evidence of the motivational power of Readers Theatre in the students’ writing journals. Omar wrote, “Readers theater is the funnest reading I’ve ever did before!” Lucia wrote, “I never thought I could be a star, but I was the BEST reader today.”

Conclusions

Readers Theatre seems to offer teachers a way to incorporate repeated readings within a meaningful and purposeful context. Creating opportunities for students to perform before an audience requires multiple readings of the text in order to achieve the fluency needed for the performance, and that practice works. Ms. Carter summarized the benefits: “I see two reasons why Readers Theatre helped my students so much. The first is comprehension that results from having to become the characters and understand their feelings, and the second is the repetition and practice.” Encouraging appropriate oral interpretation not only assists students with their expressiveness, but also sharpens their insights into the literature for themselves and their listeners. As Coger (1963) states, “The study of the written page becomes fun, and reading it aloud deepens the reader’s understanding of the text, for in reading it aloud the readers experience the writing more deeply” (p. 322).

Preparing a reading for an audience is a powerful incentive for reading practice. We observed the energy of students performing for a new audience. We observed changes in levels of confidence that a well-rehearsed effort produces. We also observed the changes in popularity of the books in the classroom library, and students who were content to just “read and read and read.” They never seemed to tire of perfecting their craft.

Readers Theatre, then, offers a reason for children to read repeatedly in appropriate materials. It provides a vehicle for direct explanation, feedback, and effective modeling. Perhaps due to the interplay of these influences, we found that Readers Theatre promoted oral reading fluency, as children explored and interpreted the meanings of literature (with joy)!

Authors’ note

We would like to thank Claire Carter and Ed Meneses for sharing their insights about Readers Theatre.

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References


“I never thought I could be a star”: A Readers Theatre ticket to fluency


Children’s books cited


Surveys of Knowledge

Write the word(s) in the blank.

1. ________________ is the ability to read words quickly with accuracy and expression.

2. ________________, with regard to fluency, is the ability to read words correctly.

3. ________________ is quick and accurate recognition of letters and words.

4. ________________ are texts that have been evaluated to establish text difficulty and grade appropriateness.

5. ________________ gives information to teachers about how accurately a student can read a text. Reading levels are independent, instructional, and frustrational.

6. ________________ is the level at which a student reads with no more than one error in twenty words, with good comprehension.

7. ________________ is the level at which a student reads with no more than one error in ten words, with satisfactory comprehension.

8. ____________ is the appropriate use of intonation and phrasing, or reading with expression.

9. _________ is the speed at which text is read.

10. ____________ stands for the number of words a student reads correctly per minute; it is used to determine a student’s fluency score.
Survey of Knowledge
Answer Key

1. **Fluency** is the ability to read words quickly with accuracy and expression.
2. **Accuracy**, with regard to fluency, is the ability to read words correctly.
3. **Automaticity** is quick and accurate recognition of letters and words.
4. **Grade-level texts** are texts that have been evaluated to establish text difficulty and grade appropriateness.
5. **Reading level** gives information to teachers about how accurately a student can read a text. Reading levels are independent, instructional, and frustrational.
6. **Independent level** is the level at which a student reads with no more than one error in twenty words, with good comprehension.
7. **Instructional level** is the level at which a student reads with no more than one error in ten words, with satisfactory comprehension.
8. **Prosody** is the appropriate use of intonation and phrasing, or reading with expression.
9. **Rate** is the speed at which text is read.
10. **WCPM** stands for the number of words a student reads correctly per minute; it is used to determine a student’s fluency score.
References


