Reading Fluency
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Reading Fluency
Teachers have long known that having their students learn to read written text fluently—with appropriate rate, accuracy, and expression—is important in the overall development of proficient reading. However, the essential link between reading fluency and comprehension may have been “new news” to some teachers. This lack of awareness about fluency likely contributed to the National Reading Panel’s conclusion (NICHD, 2000) that teaching fluency is “often neglected” (p. 3-1). Today, teachers have heard the message about the importance of including fluency instruction for students, and many teachers are also using fluency assessments to find students who may need some additional reading intervention (benchmark screening) and to assess the progress of their reading skill development (progress monitoring) (Hasbrouck, 2006).

Developing Reading Fluency
The ability to process text accurately and effortlessly develops over time as students initially master the fundamental skills involved in accurate text decoding. Teachers in kindergarten and early first grade should focus on developing students’ phonemic awareness and decoding skills, along with appropriate vocabulary development and beginning text comprehension skills. This will lay a foundation of accurate reading, a fundamental component of fluency. Because text contains a large proportion of irregular, nondecodable words (such as have, one, was, to), another key aspect of becoming a fluent reader is to develop an instantaneous recognition of these “high-frequency words.” This skill is often referred to as automaticity. As students gain confidence with reading text, teachers can begin to encourage students to read text with increasing rate while maintaining their accuracy. Teachers should also promote the use of appropriate rhythm, phrasing, and expression, so that reading begins to sound like natural speech (Stahl & Kuhn 2002).

To help develop students’ fluency skills, teachers can use a variety of techniques, including modeling fluent reading by reading aloud to students, and at times by having students read aloud with them. This technique is sometimes referred to as choral reading. Students also
benefit from opportunities to read aloud to their peers, especially when partners have been trained to correct and encourage each other.

Perhaps the most powerful technique for improving students’ reading fluency is to provide opportunities for repeated reading of text. Repeated reading is strongly supported by research as an effective strategy to develop fluency. Repeated reading can be encouraged by having students keep track of one-minute samples of reading on a graph, perhaps recording their first, unpracticed “cold reading” in one color and their final score in another color, after reading the same piece of text three to five times (Hasbrouck, Ihnot, & Rogers 1999). These individual graphs offer immediate, concrete, and positive feedback that can powerfully motivate students to keep practicing.

Readers’ theater is another way teachers can promote repeated reading of text. Here, students rehearse a short drama or play, repeatedly reading rather than memorizing their individual parts. There is little compelling evidence, however, that readers’ theater has sufficient intensity to serve as an intervention for students who struggle with fluency.

Assessing Reading Fluency

Teachers need to know how fluent their students should be and how to measure fluency development in individual students. Listening to a student read aloud for one minute from an unpracticed piece of grade-level text can provide teachers with a great deal of valuable information.

• Assessing Expression

Students’ expression can be assessed using the oral reading fluency scale from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP scale has four levels of proficiency that provide a guide to assessing how well students read: 1) group or phrase words and use intonation, stress, and pauses; 2) adhere to the author’s syntax; and 3) use expression by interjecting a sense of feeling, anticipation, or characterization (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

• Assessing Rate and Accuracy

To determine the accuracy and rate of a student’s reading, a teacher can assess the number of words correct per minute (wcpm). While the student reads aloud from the unpracticed sample of grade-level text, the teacher notes any errors (mispronunciations, substitutions, omissions, words read out of order, or words supplied for the student after a 3–5 second pause). At the end of one minute, the teacher directs the student to stop reading and subtracts the total number of errors from the number of words attempted.

Interpreting Fluency Scores

Students’ wcpm scores can be compared to benchmark norms for oral reading fluency (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). If a student’s score is within plus or minus 10 wcpm of the 50th percentile on the oral reading fluency norms, or is more than 10 wcpm above the 50th percentile, the student can be considered to be making adequate progress in fluency, unless other indicators raise concern. However, students whose fluency scores are 5-10 words below the 50th percentile should be monitored closely by their teachers to make sure that their skills are developing adequately (Hasbrouck, 2006).

The extensive research on curriculum-based measurement (CBM) indicates that wcpm scores can also be used as an indicator of overall reading proficiency (Wayman, et al., 2007). Many schools now conduct these fluency benchmark or screening assessments at least three times per year, in the fall, winter, and spring to help find students who may need some additional instruction. The wcpm scores should be considered as one indicator of progress along
with other assessments and observations of each student’s reading, writing, and spelling. When students are receiving intervention for reading, CBM research suggests that teachers should consider assessing students’ fluency using instructional level materials and graphing the scores to determine the effectiveness of their intervention programs.

Bioography

Dr. Jan Hasbrouck is an educational consultant, trainer, and researcher. She served as the Executive Consultant to the Washington State Reading Initiative and as an advisor to the Texas Reading Initiative. Dr. Hasbrouck worked as a reading specialist for 15 years before becoming a professor at the University of Oregon and later Texas A&M University. Dr. Hasbrouck has provided educational consulting to individual schools across the United States as well as in Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, and Germany, helping teachers and administrators design and implement effective assessment and instructional programs targeted to help low-performing readers.

Dr. Hasbrouck earned her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Oregon, and completed her Ph.D. at Texas A&M University. Her research in areas of reading fluency, reading assessment, coaching and consultation, and second language learners has been published in numerous professional books and journals. She is the coauthor of “The Reading Coach: A How-to Manual for Success,” “Differentiated Instruction: Grouping for Success,” and several assessment tools. Dr. Hasbrouck works with the Macmillan/McGraw Hill publishers as an author of their Treasures and Triumphs reading programs.

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