



Reading fluency instruction: Moving beyond accuracy, automaticity, and prosody

Timothy Rasinski

The longer I live, the more I see there's something about reciting rhythmical words aloud—it's almost biological—that comforts and enlivens human beings.

Robert Pinsky, 1997–2000 Poet Laureate of the United States

This is my first column for the Issues and Trends in Literacy department after taking over from the previous editor, Linda Gambrell. In it I write on a topic about which I feel most knowledgeable—reading fluency. Moreover, because reading fluency is increasingly recognized as critical to students' literacy development, it is important to continue a professional conversation and dialogue on the topic. To this end, then, I use an article from the May 2005 issue of *The Reading Teacher* as the starting point for my commentary on this emerging and important issue in reading education.

In the May 2005 article “Reading fluency assessment and instruction: What, why, and how?” Roxanne Hudson, Holly Lane, and Paige Pullen did a masterful job of defining and describing three key elements of reading fluency: accuracy in word decoding, automaticity in recognizing words, and appropriate use of prosody or meaningful oral expression while reading. These three components are a gateway to comprehension. Readers must be able to decode words correctly and effortlessly (automaticity) and then put them together into meaningful phrases with the appropriate expression to make sense of what they read.

Too many developing readers (a) make an excessive number of decoding errors while reading; (b) read words in text correctly but put such effort into the task that they exhaust their cognitive re-

sources, which should be devoted to comprehension; or (c) decode words accurately and effortlessly but are unable to put them together in a way that adds appropriate and meaningful expression to their oral reading. The result of any of these manifestations is often poor comprehension, a decided lack of enthusiasm for reading, and a personal sense of failure.

In addition to defining reading fluency, Hudson et al. gave some solid suggestions for teaching each area of fluency. Although their recommendations are valid and based in the research literature, I am a bit concerned for several reasons. Implied in their presentation of fluency instruction methods is the notion that word accuracy and automaticity should be taught separately from prosodic reading. Accuracy and automaticity, they suggested, are best taught through methods aimed at improving student reading rate—the way to measure progress in these areas. Prosody in reading is taught through modeling, performance, focus on phrasing, assisted reading techniques, and explicit instruction on appropriate intonation.

I have no quarrel with the methods they present for teaching fluency, but I do have two concerns about the notion of teaching the components of fluency separately. First, dividing this instruction requires extra time to teach each component: Time must be given to accuracy and automaticity, and additional time must be given to prosody. We all know that time is precious in any instructional setting, and having to provide separate instruction in each of these areas is not efficient. My second concern about the segmentation described is the

message it sends to students (and teachers) about the goal of fluency instruction, particularly with the repeated reading instruction aimed at improving word-recognition automaticity. Because improvements in automaticity are determined by gains in reading rate, it is not difficult to see why students (and teachers) begin to focus almost exclusively on improving reading rate as the goal for fluency instruction. Indeed, the primary aim of many instructional programs is to increase reading rate through repeated reading of nonfiction material. It is not unreasonable, then, to suspect that students in such programs would persevere on reading faster for the sake of reading faster, without giving commensurate attention to comprehension. The result of such a focus is faster reading with little improvement on comprehension, which is the ultimate goal of reading and reading instruction.

There are dedicated and well-meaning teachers who have taken this goal of improving reading rate to heart and focused their instruction on improving students' reading rate through repeated readings and other rate-building activities. Students in these classrooms have become faster readers, but their reading comprehension has not improved. Students learn what we teach them. Indeed, a new generation of students is appearing at U.S. university reading clinics, students who have learned to read fast but are poor comprehenders and poor readers.

I fear that a single-minded focus on using repeated reading to improve reading rate, without commensurate emphasis on reading for meaning, will not have the desired result of improving comprehension and will eventually return reading fluency to a secondary role in the curriculum.

Good fluency instruction

I think that instruction on accuracy, automaticity, and prosodic reading can and should occur in unison—in an integrated and synergistic manner. Here is how I see good fluency instruction. First, I do agree with Hudson et al. that repeated reading is one of the best ways to develop fluency. But then I ask myself, what would make me or anyone else want to engage in repeated reading? To improve my rate of reading? Not really. What would really inspire me to engage in repeated reading or rehearsal is performance. If I were to give an oral

reading performance of a passage, I would most certainly have an incentive to practice, rehearse, or engage in repeated readings. All of us, at one time or another, have read orally for an audience. It is likely that we practiced in advance of that reading, and if we didn't it is likely that we wish we had.

To continue with this line of reasoning, if performance is the incentive to practice, then we need to ask what kinds of texts lend themselves to expressive oral performance? Informational texts? Not likely. Despite other important qualities, they do not lend themselves easily to expressive interpretation. Narrative material? Perhaps. However, there are several other text genres that are specifically meant to be performed or that are easy to perform—rhythmical, rhetorical, or interactive texts such as poetry, song lyrics, chants, rhymes, plays (Readers Theatre), monologues, dialogues, and letters. Such texts work well for oral reading with expression and meaning, not just speed. To me these texts are the perfect fit for fluency instruction and repeated readings. Moreover, these legitimate genres have largely been left out of the U.S. school reading curriculum. By using them, teachers expose students to a wider variety of reading genres, and by practicing and performing them, students gain in accuracy, automaticity (rate), prosody, *and* comprehension.

Classroom research has shown that this approach to repeated readings has helped students make remarkable progress in reading rate (even though improving reading rate was not emphasized). General growth in reading and, perhaps most significant, enjoyment of reading have also increased. In their study of second graders' use of Readers Theatre, Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1999) found that students doing repeated readings with Readers Theatre made twice the gain in reading rate than a comparison group, even though the focus of the repeated reading was on expressive, meaning-filled reading and not on speed. The Readers Theatre students also made substantially greater progress than the comparison group on an informal reading inventory—a measure of reading that includes reading comprehension as well as fluency. Moreover, students doing Readers Theatre loved to practice because they would later perform the materials they had rehearsed for an audience. Second grader Lucia wrote in her journal, "I never thought I could be a star, but I was the best reader today" (p. 333).

In another second-grade study of repeated readings (Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant, 1994), struggling readers who rehearsed and then performed poetry and other performance texts made significantly greater gains in reading rate than students reading but not rehearsing and performing the same material.

In a study of first graders rehearsing poetry with their parents each night (Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005), students most at risk for failure in reading made nearly two-and-a-half times the progress in reading rate as students who read the poetry with their parents but did not rehearse it. As in the previous studies, the emphasis was on reading with expression, enthusiasm, and meaning, not speed. Nevertheless, reading speed (as well as other indicators of reading proficiency) showed significant improvement.

Similar results have been seen with older students. Working in her own fourth-grade classroom, Lorraine Griffith (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004) found that a weekly program of practicing and then performing Readers Theatre scripts and poetry resulted in a reading rate gain of 48.2 words correct per minute for her Title I students. (Title I is a U.S. federally funded program for at-risk students.) This represents an improvement that is more than double the approximately 15–20 word-count-per-minute gain that is expected of normally developing fourth graders (Hudson et al., 2005). Yet, throughout Griffith's work with students, the emphasis was on repeated reading for expression and meaning, not speed. Although she later incorporated a timed reading segment into her fluency program, she chose texts of high literary quality that could easily be performed, and she kept the focus on reading with meaningful expression.

Repeated reading is key

My purpose in this column is to reinforce the recommendation by Hudson et al. that repeated

reading is a key instructional method for developing reading fluency. I also wish to express a strong concern that the aim of repeated reading should be meaningful and expressive oral interpretation or performance of text, not faster reading. To that end, certain texts lend themselves to oral interpretive reading. Those are the ones teachers should be looking for and using in fluency instruction. Indeed, if such texts become the focus and content of reading fluency instruction then students will also know the sense of comfort and vitality that poet Robert Pinsky says comes from reading rhythmic words aloud.

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