

The Fluency Factor

Authentic Instruction
and Assessment for
Reading Success in
the Common Core
Classroom

**Timothy Rasinski and
James K. Nageldinger**

Foreword by Patricia M. Cunningham



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Haven't You Heard? Fluency Is NOT Hot!

We recently had a chance to visit a school in a nearby city, where we had previously spoken to teachers and administrators about reading fluency. We were interested in seeing how their thoughts about and approaches to teaching reading fluency have evolved since our last visit a few years earlier. We were struck by the comments of several teachers—one teacher said to us, “Oh, we don’t do fluency anymore; I want my 1st-graders to focus on comprehension, not reading fast.” A 3rd-grade teacher said, “I’ve decided to integrate my fluency instruction into silent reading time. As my students read silently, I prompt them to be sure to read quickly and expressively.” Over half the teachers we visited in this school had developed either a negative view of reading fluency or had decided that it could be left to a comment or two made prior to students’ silent reading.

This is not an uncommon finding in schools across the country. Reading fluency’s place in the school reading curriculum has diminished significantly. And it’s not just how teachers approach reading fluency. Even scholars of reading seem to have developed a negative view of reading fluency. For the past several years, the International Literacy Association has sponsored an annual survey of scholars’ opinions of literacy topics that are hot and not hot. Topics such as comprehension and standards have been consistently rated as hot. However, from 2008 through 2014 the scholars in the survey have identified reading fluency as a “not hot” topic. Moreover, the scholars were also of the opinion that fluency “should not be hot.”

Now, we can argue about what “hot” and “not hot” means in the context of this survey. Is it that these scholars feel fluency is not an important competency worth pursuing instructionally? Or is it that although fluency may be an important competency, the way it is actually approached in instructional settings leaves much to be desired?

Or is it that fluency is simply not on the current cutting edge of topics on which some scholars are focused? Regardless of which rationale has made fluency “not hot” for half a decade, the source of concern remains that it, fluency, is not generally viewed in a positive light by those—reading teachers and scholars—in the know.

If fluency is not hot, then some teachers might wonder why we are writing a book about it. Certainly, who would want to read a book on a topic that is not considered valuable for student growth and improvement? Yet, even though some teachers do not believe fluency has value in the classroom, we believe that reading fluency is indeed important. In fact, we feel that learning to read fluently is critical for student success. Because many students fail to achieve sufficient levels of fluency for their age or grade level, this, in turn, can lead to difficulties in other reading areas such as comprehension, motivation for reading, and self-confidence.

The problem with fluency’s lack of heat, as we see it, is the way that many well-meaning and dedicated reading teachers have defined and approached it instructionally. Early definitions of reading fluency almost always include some reference to speed of reading (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2000). Indeed, one of the easiest ways some teachers choose to measure reading fluency is to have students read a grade-level text for 1 minute and then count the number of words they were able to read correctly. Research has shown that this measure of reading fluency correlates remarkably well with reading comprehension and other measures of general reading competency. And so, because some teachers define and connect fluency through this measure, a number of publishers developed several reading fluency programs for teaching reading fluency that intentionally or unintentionally communicate to teachers and students that the goal of reading fluency is to foster faster reading. Because teachers continue to focus on fluency and speed, some students are able to read quickly but are unable to comprehend/understand what they’ve read. They blow through punctuation, minimize pausing and reflection, read in a monotone, and end their reading without good comprehension or much satisfaction.

No wonder fluency is not hot. If this is what defines fluency, we would certainly share these students and teachers’ sentiments.

We think that speed, one aspect of fluency, is one good way of tracking students’ growth in this area. However, we don’t feel that simply teaching students to read more quickly is the way to improve their fluency. Speed in reading is a consequence, not a cause, of fluency. We do want students to become faster readers, but we want

them to become fast in the same ways that all of you reading this book became reasonably fast readers. Do you recall how you became a fast reader? Did someone judge you based solely on how quickly you read? Were you in a reading program that focused solely on speed? Did you have a teacher who encouraged you regularly to read faster each day? We think not.

We think you became a fast reader the same way we became fast readers—by reading frequently, orally, and silently. We read by ourselves, with parents, teachers, and classmates, and in various groups. As we read, we learned to recognize words more effortlessly and efficiently and, as a result, our speed increased. With increased efficiency in word recognition, we were more able to move our cognitive resources away from word recognition to the more important task of comprehension. So speed and comprehension improved through practice in reading.

Fluency's relative demise has also been because of its predominant association with oral reading. We talk about fluent oral speakers; it follows that fluency in reading is also associated with oral language production. After all, we can only observe fluency in reading during oral reading. So, the thinking goes, because fluency is about oral reading and most of the reading done by adults is silent reading, why should fluency matter for most readers? The truth of the matter is that the way one reads orally reflects how one reads silently. It is likely that when coming across a difficult word to decode or sound out, a reader will be challenged, whether reading it orally or silently. So we take that position that fluency may be observed orally, but it still happens when reading silently. In fact, eye movement in reading research (Samuels, Rasinski, & Hiebert, 2011) suggests that fluency is a major factor for proficient silent reading.

Fluency has also been dismissed by some because it is a competency associated with the early stages of literacy development. Some models of reading development view it as something to be achieved in the primary grades (Chall, 1996). Again, though we see that fluency is indeed a competency that we want students to develop as early in their school careers as possible, the Common Core State Standards call fluency a "foundational" reading skill, a competency upon which other, more sophisticated competencies, developed later in a student's school career, rely (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

The problem with thinking of fluency only as a primary grade competency is that fluency is, in a sense, a relative concept; that is, a reader's fluency or lack of fluency is relative to the difficulty of the

THINK ABOUT IT

What memories do you have of your own learning to read in school? Jot down the memories, both positive and negative, that you can recall. Which ones were most positive and why? Which tended to be negative? Were there any things that your teachers did that improved your ability to read fluently (with automatic word recognition and appropriate expression in oral reading)? Do you recall events that may have affected your fluency in a negative way? What can we do to make the positive aspects of your learning to read fluency a regular and integral part of your own instruction?

WHAT WE THINK

We think that people have a tendency to repeat what has occurred in the past. Much of the way all of us learned to read is probably a good way for many children to learn to read. The problem is that we often repeat the negative as well as the positive experiences we have had. The key is to sort out the negative from the positive and intentionally try to maximize the positive aspects of fluency instruction, while minimizing the negative.

Tim (one of the authors of this book) recalls having to read orally in class during round-robin reading. On most occasions, he was able to read with decent fluency. But because he seldom had a chance to preview the readings before the teacher called on him, he would sometimes stumble on several words and had to have the teacher call on him to “sound out” each difficult word. These practices did not seem to improve Tim’s reading. Rather, they contributed to a decrease in self-confidence as a reader, an increase in shame for reading poorly, and an increase in embarrassment for subjecting his classmates to listening to a rendering of a text that was far from fluent or meaningful.

text the reader is reading. A student may read a 3rd-grade passage fluently, but the same student might not read a text written at a 5th-grade level fluently. Our point here is that, yes, fluency is something that students should master early on with grade-level texts. However, as students graduate to more challenging texts, the fluent reading of these texts must evolve as well. Even as adults we sometimes encounter texts that would challenge our fluency (Tim has been working with a lawyer on developing a will. The documents that the attorney

has been sending to Tim have caused considerable disfluency—and frustration—in his reading fluency and comprehension.)

If teachers do not continually develop fluency in their students, some students will fall behind in their reading fluency relative to the texts they are asked to read. Several studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between various measures of reading fluency and more-general measures of reading achievement, including comprehension in the middle and secondary grades (Paige, Rasinski, & Magpuri-Lavell, 2012; Rasinski, Padak, McKeon, Krug-Wilfong, Friedauer, & Heim, 2005; Rasinski, Riki, & Johnston, 2009). Moreover, the same studies have found that a significant number of students who struggle in their overall reading achievement are well below what we might consider minimal levels of proficiency in their fluency. So, if you happen to be a teacher in the middle or secondary grades, this book is for you, too!

THINK ABOUT IT

Do you have students who you think struggle with fluency? What behaviors do they exhibit that lead you to this observation? What do you see as the consequences to these students' fluency problems? Does it affect their reading in other ways? Does it have an impact on how they feel about reading? How does it affect how they feel about themselves as readers? Do you see any connection between problems in fluency and students' reading and learning in other subject areas? What other observations do you have?

WHAT WE THINK

You probably can predict what we think about students who struggle in reading fluency. Granted, they struggle in other areas of reading across the curriculum. But perhaps the greatest impediment we see is in students' attitudes toward reading; they dislike it because they lack confidence in themselves as readers. Students who struggle in reading often publicly demonstrate their lack of proficiency in fluency, as compared perhaps to more fluent peers, because they doubt their own ability to become proficient readers. This lack of confidence then causes them to avoid reading, because reading does not bring them much satisfaction. And this leads to more relative regression in fluency, a growing lack of confidence, and even less reading.