

## Fluency: Still Waiting After All These Years

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**A**lmost 25 years ago my article “Fluency: The Neglected Goal” (Allington, 1983a) was published. Fluency was a topic of interest for a while. A number of studies, most often measuring the effectiveness of some form of repeated reading on fluency, were published over the years, but fluency did not really become a focal point of educators’ concerns again until it was identified as one of the evidence-based “pillars” of scientific reading by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). Still, there remain a number of issues concerning fluency that have not been adequately sorted out.

### Reading Efficiency Versus Fluency

One question we educators should ask is whether current popular measures of fluency are more accurately measures of word-reading efficiency than of fluency (Mathson, Solic, & Allington, 2006). I think fluency is reading in phrases, with appropriate intonation and prosody—fluency is reading with expression.

Phrasing, intonation, and prosody have long been considered components of fluent reading (Clay & Imlach, 1971; Schreiber, 1980, 1991); however, today we find measures of word- and nonword-reading efficiency and of reading rate being offered as measures of fluency (see, for instance, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills [DIBELS]; Good & Kaminski, 2002). But automaticity of isolated word recognition is a measure of something quite different from a measure of reading fluency as historically conceived. Although one’s reading rate is most certainly related to fluency, if only because word-by-word reading is always slower than phrase reading, one can also read quickly but with little appropriate phrasing, intonation, or prosody (Rasinski, 2000).

Dahl and Samuels (1977) demonstrated that training in rapid word identification did not improve reading fluency or comprehension of texts read. Buly and Valencia (2002) found that one of five students who failed a state fourth-grade reading proficiency test were automatic decoders who read accurately and quickly but with little comprehension. It is not that reading rate, or word-reading efficiency, is unimportant, but that it is something different from reading fluency (Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker, & Stahl, 2004).

More problematic is the sight of struggling readers practicing speeded reading of lists of nonwords and words in the hopes of improving their DIBELS word-reading efficiency performances. Problematic because, as Schwanenflugel and her colleagues (2004) caution, several studies have convincingly demonstrated that such training simply does not improve text-reading performances. Perhaps this distortion of the notion of what fluency is and how it is developed has resulted in the DIBELS not proving a very reliable predictor of early reading difficulties. Carlisle, Schilling, Scott, and Zeng (2004) found that about half of the second and third graders who were predicted to be reading on level in the spring, based on fall DIBELS performances, were actually performing below the 50th percentile on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) Total Reading in the spring. Such students who prove to be false negatives, particularly on this scale, are of concern because of the implications for their access to needed instruction. Similarly, while DIBELS seems to measure word-reading efficiency fairly reliably, Pressley, Hilden, and Shankland (2005) evaluated DIBELS and found that “DIBELS mispredicts reading performance on other assessments much of the time, and at best is a measure of who reads quickly without regard to whether the reader comprehends what is read” (p. 1).

Fluency, reading in phrases with appropriate intonation and prosody, seems an important characteristic of effective reading. Word-reading efficiency also seems an important, but different, characteristic of effective reading. Although problems with decoding and word-reading automaticity can be linked to reading dysfluency (word-by-word reading) in some cases, several other explanations for children who can read accurately but not fluently will be discussed in the following section.

## **Sources of Reading Dysfluency**

Dysfluent reading is the opposite of fluent reading. Dysfluent reading is most often rendered as a word-by-word reading of a text with little or no

phrasing, intonation, or inflection. Dysfluent reading may also be reading in clumps of words but not reading phrases or reading fast and accurately but with no intonational variation, with little or no phrasing. Dysfluent reading simply sounds awkward.

## The Role of Instruction

I think that word-by-word reading may be a learned adaptive response to a specific type of instructional setting (Allington, 1980, 1983b). Children read word-by-word when they have been trained to rely on an external monitor (the teacher, aide, or other students) rather than to self-regulate when reading aloud. So how is this dependence learned?

Several researchers have documented that teachers are more likely to have lower achieving readers read aloud than the better readers (Allington, 1983b; Chinn, Waggoner, Anderson, Schommer, & Wilkinson, 1993; Hiebert, 1983). Often this reading aloud occurs during a directed reading lesson when each child reads aloud a bit, in turn. In these lessons teachers are far more likely to interrupt the lower achieving readers than the higher achieving readers, to interrupt poor readers more quickly, and to have the interruption focus on “sounding words out” (Allington, 1980; Chinn et al., 1993; Hoffman et al., 1984). Teachers also allow other readers to interrupt struggling readers, while discouraging such interruptions when better readers read aloud (Eder & Felmlee, 1984). In other words, we have good evidence that teachers typically interact differently with students who differ in reading proficiency. They not only interact differently, but they also organize reading lessons differently.

The evidence indicates that struggling readers are more likely than better readers

- to be reading material that is difficult for them,
- to be asked to read orally,
- to have their attention focused on accuracy rather than comprehension,
- to be interrupted when they misread a word,
- to be interrupted more quickly,
- to pause while reading and wait for a teacher to prompt, and
- to be told to sound out a word.

And evidence also indicates that better readers are more likely than struggling readers

- to be reading material of an appropriate level of difficulty,
- to be asked to read silently,
- to be expected to self-monitor and self-correct,
- to have attention focused on understanding,
- to be interrupted only after a wait period or at end of sentence, and
- to be asked to reread or to cross-check when interrupted.

Given such different reading lessons, is it surprising that struggling readers begin to read differently, hesitantly? I describe the word-by-word reading as a learned behavior, a “checking the traffic” response (Allington, 2006). Given a steady stream of rapid, external interruptions, struggling readers begin to read with an anticipation of interruptions—reading word-by-word. In some classrooms, you can observe an audible “Um-huh” from the teacher after a struggling reader pronounces each word. In some severe cases, the struggling reader actually looks up from the text to check with the teacher after every word is read.

I will suggest that this hesitation is a trained behavior and not an indication of any skills deficit in particular. Some have argued that word-by-word reading indicates inadequate development of sight vocabulary or limited decoding proficiency. But a number of studies have indicated that older struggling readers—those dysfluent, word-by-word readers—often know more sight words and have more phonics skills when compared to younger better readers. At the same time, the younger better readers read more fluently and with better self-monitoring (Allington, 1983b). Other studies have shown that training struggling readers to recognize words faster had little positive effect on reading fluency or overall reading achievement (Dahl & Samuels, 1977; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003).

What does seem effective is providing struggling readers with lots of opportunity to develop self-monitoring skills and strategies (Kuhn, 2005a, 2005b; Samuels, 2002). Thus, teachers would offer lessons more like those offered better readers: Reading from appropriately difficult texts, more opportunities to read silently, and more opportunities to select texts they find interesting. When reading aloud teachers would reduce or delay interruptions when word recognition breaks down, focus student attention on self-monitoring and on understanding what was read. Although each of these shifts seems important, most are dependent on the first—providing appropriate texts.

## The Role of High-Success Reading Experiences

I think some children fail to develop adequate fluency for another reason: They have had limited reading practice, particularly practice in high-success texts. High-success reading experiences are characterized by accurate, fluent reading with good understanding of the text that was read. It is this sort of reading that too often seems in short supply in the reading experiences of struggling readers. However, I know of no experimental research directly testing the hypothesis that a steady diet of too-hard texts fosters dysfluency. Designing such a study—at least one following the federal criteria for scientific research—would create some ethical concerns. That is, given the known power of placing children in appropriately difficult text, providing a steady diet of too-hard texts to some randomly selected children (control group) and a diet of appropriately difficult texts to other randomly selected children (experimental group) would seem to violate the basic ethical principle of “Knowingly, do no harm.”

Nonetheless, the widespread evidence from natural experiments—studies of the naturally occurring variation that exists from classroom to classroom—that struggling readers typically read less and that they are often placed in texts that are too hard, as well as the commonness of fluency problems in these students, suggests that the “checking-the-traffic” and high-success reading practice hypotheses deserve consideration. I do know from my clinical experiences that providing children access with appropriately leveled texts and a noninterruptive reading environment typically produces profound changes in reading fluency and self-monitoring.

## The Role of Reading Volume

Modifying the reading lessons so that there is a greater focus on self-regulating and on ensuring that struggling readers have texts they can read accurately, fluently, and with understanding is critical if we want to enhance fluency. But as I have suggested (Allington, 2006), another critical step in designing interventions for struggling readers begins with ensuring that these students engage in at least as much reading activity as their more successful peers. As Guthrie (2004) has noted, virtually every study of reading volume indicates that struggling readers engage in far less reading activity than do more successful readers. The work of Share and Stanovich (1995) and Stanovich and West (1989) suggests that it is extensive engagement in high-success reading activity that provides

the opportunity for readers to consolidate the various skills and components of proficient reading. With little high-success practice, readers simply fail to develop the proficiencies that are essential for skilled, autonomous reading.

There exists support for an important role for reading volume in several studies of reading fluency, especially the studies of the repeated-reading technique. A bountiful supply of research on the positive effects of the repeated-reading procedure in fostering fluency exists (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; NICHD, 2000). However, much of that research is fundamentally flawed because few studies had the control groups engaged in reading while the experimental students engaged in repeated readings of texts. As Kuhn and Stahl (2003) first noted, it may be the more extensive reading practice that fostered fluency rather than practice repeatedly reading the same texts. In the few studies that had the control groups engage in independent reading while the experimental students engaged in repeated reading, the two activities have produced comparable fluency and word-recognition gains (cf. Rashotte & Torgesen, 1985). Thus, simply increasing the volume of reading produced the same positive effects of reading fluency and word recognition as the repeated-reading technique. But little has been written about the role of reading volume in fostering fluency or broader reading proficiencies.

In addition, Kuhn (2005a, 2005b) found that extensive independent-reading activity produced comprehension gains that the repeated-reading technique did not. She notes that though fluency is important, fluent reading does not automatically ensure comprehension. Furthermore, a focus on simply reading fluently in repeated-reading interventions may bias students in a manner that undermines developing an intention to understand what is being read. Repeated-reading interventions would seem to benefit from a more viable comprehension component than has been typically provided.

Extensive engagement in high-success reading activity seems an essential factor in fostering proficient reading (Share & Stanovich, 1995). More-than-sufficient evidence illustrates the impacts of reading volume to seriously consider whether the fundamental problem faced by dysfluent readers is simply one of limited high-success reading practice (Guthrie, 2004). If struggling readers are typically engaged in far less reading activity (as virtually every study on the topic demonstrates) and substantially less high-success reading practice, then one does not have to invoke pseudoscientific explanations such as attention deficits,

learning disabilities, or neurological damage or deficiencies to explain why few struggling readers ever become active, engaged, and proficient readers.

## **Looking at Struggling Readers in Your School**

The importance of high-success reading activity has its own fairly extensive research base (Allington, 2006). But only the best readers in most schools actually engage in huge amounts of high-success reading. These are the children reading above grade level who have desks filled with grade-level texts, ones they can read accurately, fluently, and with strong comprehension. It is the average and struggling readers who more often consume a steady diet of less successful reading.

Consider a third grader in your school who reads at the early second-grade level. Does she have a third-grade-level basal reader, a third-grade core trade book, a third-grade science book, and a third-grade social studies book in her desk—and in her hands all day long? Do we really need a psychologist to explain why she is not making much progress in school? To explain why she reads dysfluently? With little comprehension? Why she seems unmotivated to read much voluntarily? Even if she participates in a supplemental intervention program that provides 30 minutes of daily lessons and practice in appropriately difficult texts, she returns to a classroom and her desk filled with books she cannot read successfully. And she still has 300 minutes of instruction every day in texts that are inappropriately difficult.

Too often, even participating in a supplemental intervention program does little to optimize matching struggling readers with appropriate texts. O'Connor and colleagues (2002) indicate that in many school systems the supplementary intervention lessons use the grade-level texts that are found in the struggling reader's desk. Their randomized field experiment demonstrated that providing daily intervention lessons using those grade-level texts was not nearly as successful as providing daily lessons using texts matched to the reading level of the struggling readers. Given that selecting texts that are of appropriate complexity for the learners is the first step in the design of effective instruction, O'Connor and colleagues wonder why anyone would think that matching intervention texts to readers would not also be the first step in planning effective intervention. I wonder also and likewise routinely observe support personnel attempting to drag some struggling reader through a text he or she should never have been given in the first place.

I have never encountered a theory that suggests that matching texts to kids is only important for achieving students but that struggling students will do well with too-hard texts. No empirical evidence supports such lesson design either. All readers need texts of appropriate complexity for their lessons and practice. But for some reason many schools seem to be enamored with providing too-hard texts for students, especially struggling readers; for example, consider the current antiscientific emphasis on placing all students in a grade-level reading program and providing whole-class lessons as a way to enhance reading achievement. Do struggling readers in your school have high-success texts in their hands all day long? For every subject area? Or do those struggling readers have mostly too-difficult texts in their desks and in their hands?

Adults prefer easy, high-success, reading. No adult has ever decided not to read the new John Grisham novel because the last one was “too easy”—with too few hard words or with too few passages that required several rereadings to comprehend. If adults preferred hard reading, you would not be able to sell *People* magazine, *Entertainment Weekly*, or *The National Enquirer*. Instead, adults would be purchasing *Scientific American*, *The Economist*, and the *Financial Times*.

Learning to read requires huge amounts of highly successful and engaging practice (Guthrie, 2004; Share & Stanovich, 1995). We might begin to redesign our reading lessons (and our science and social studies lessons) in ways that ensure that all students have easy, frequent access to texts that provide high-success practice, engaging content (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004), and opportunities for literate conversation about those texts (Johnston, 2004).

## Conclusions

I do believe reading with fluency is important. But I also believe that many, if not most, students who exhibit dysfluent reading are but products of poorly designed instructional environments. Too often these are children who sit all day in classrooms and rarely have texts in their hands they can read accurately, fluently, and with understanding. These are too often children whose dysfluency is but a signal that they have been routinely given the wrong texts, texts that are too difficult. They often then avoid even trying to read these texts, but when they do read them they struggle. And then they are subjected to almost continuous external interruptions and corrections until the instructional environment has disabled them.



The intervention that I would propose is straightforward. Provide these children with high-success reading experiences all day long. Fill their desks with books that they can read accurately, fluently, and with understanding. Once a day we might give them slightly harder texts in a guided-reading setting. Guided reading that uses shared-book experiences (Reutzel, Hollingsworth, & Eldredge, 1994), for instance, can help ease students into high-success reading of those texts. Provide a few minutes of explicit and powerful demonstrations of useful decoding, self-regulating, and comprehension strategies. Make sure the classroom has a huge supply of interesting texts at levels of complexity that will allow these students to engage in extended independent reading (Guthrie, 2004).

I might make some short-term use of strategies such as repeated reading. But only in the short term (say two to three weeks). My goal with repeated readings would be to help dysfluent readers begin to understand what fluent reading feels like. But these repeated-reading lessons should also focus on understanding what is being read (Kuhn, 2005a; Stayter & Allington, 1991). After years of reading word by word, some students may need repeated-reading training to begin to break a long-standing habit brought on by poorly designed instruction and poorly thought-out reading curriculum (whole-class lessons in a grade-level reading series, for instance).

After a few weeks, I would drop repeated reading and concentrate on ensuring that struggling readers read more each day than my normally developing readers (a necessity if they are ever to close the gap). Furthermore, even while I was having the two weeks of 15–20 minutes of repeated reading each day, I would work to enhance the volume of reading across the school day for the struggling readers. How much time should be spent reading during the school day? That is a question yet to be answered experimentally. But the research available from natural experiments suggests 90–120 minutes of daily high-success reading activity in school is a minimal target (Allington, 2006; Guthrie, 2004). So we should work to ensure that the design of reading lessons for struggling readers, both classroom and intervention lessons, ensures this minimal volume of successful practice.

Reading fluency is once again a topic of interest. But much remains to learn about the role of reading fluency in reading acquisition, how to best foster reading fluency, and how to ensure that fostering reading fluency also enhances reading comprehension, motivation, and proficiency. We also need to better understand how our instructional inter-

actions might undermine self-regulation and agency and create readers who read dysfluently, with little understanding and little motivation to read voluntarily. We know a little about fluency, but a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

### Questions for Discussion

1. If you selected 10 struggling readers in your school, how many would have a desk full of texts they could read accurately, fluently, and with understanding?
2. If you observed 10 reading lessons offered to struggling readers, how many lessons would provide support for developing self-regulation while reading? How many lessons would be characterized by immediate and frequent interruptions of struggling readers' performances?
3. How many second-grade-level books does the typical fourth-grade classroom have for struggling fourth-grade readers to read? Is it less than 100 books?
4. How many struggling readers actually read more than the better readers every day in school? How many read less? Much less?

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