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Fluency is More than Reading Quickly!

by Sylvia Linan-Thompson

Fluent reading is important because it represents effortless reading. If a task is easy and enjoyable we are more likely to engage in it. Conversely, if a task is difficult we are less likely to voluntarily engage in it. The implication for English language learners (ELLs) extends beyond fluency since we learn most of our new vocabulary from wide reading.

Thanks to the increased attention to reading instruction most of us are able to define reading fluency as involving three skills: reading accurately, at a good rate, and with prosody. To best promote students' achievement, it is important to understand why each of these components is critical for fluent reading as well as comprehension.

Accuracy Students who can read accurately have developed decoding skills, can read a substantial number of high frequency words automatically, and have strategies for reading unknown words when they encounter them in text (Turner & Chapman, 1995). Accurate reading is also important to comprehension. Although it may not affect comprehension if we read *home* for *house*, it will if we read *horse* for *house*. Therefore, it is important to ensure that students develop adequate decoding skills. Exposure to and practice reading high frequency and decodable words both in isolation and in text will help students develop automaticity in reading words. Students also need to learn to monitor their understanding of what they read. This monitoring will help them self-correct if a word they read incorrectly affects their comprehension of what they are reading.

“If students pause appropriately, use correct phrasing, or change their intonation and expression in response to the text, we can usually assume that they understand what they are reading.”

Rate Students who have developed automaticity in reading words will be able to read at an appropriate rate. To help you understand why automaticity at the word level is important in reading, remember what it was like to learn to ride a bike. When we are first learning to ride most of our attention is on maintaining our balance and keeping the bicycle moving forward. We are not able to admire the scenery or to hold a conversation. As our ability to maintain our balance becomes automatic, we can begin to enjoy the scenery and can hold conversations with other riders. If we are daring, we may even ride with “no hands”. LaBerge and Samuels (1974) explained that because we are only able to attend to one thing at a time, we alternate our attention between activities when we have to attend to two or more activities. However, if one activity is so well learned that it is automatic, we can give another activity our undivided attention. If we apply this analogy to reading fluency it becomes clear that to maximize comprehension, word reading has to be automatic.

A bike-riding analogy can help us understand the challenge of vocabulary for ELLs. We know from cognitive studies that people can retain seven items for twelve seconds in short-term memory. After twelve seconds we have to do something with the information or we lose the memory. Readers must be able to hold information in working memory while constructing meaning from text (Francis, Rivera, et al., 2006). When learning to read in a second language, students frequently encounter words they can decode but may not know the meaning of. Their attention becomes diverted and working memory taxed as they try to make sense of these words. By the time they figure out the meaning of the words, they may have lost the thread of the text, with a resulting loss of both fluency and comprehension.

Prosody Equally important to automaticity, reading with prosody, or the rhythm of natural language, can serve as an indicator that students are processing the text as they read. Reading with prosody includes several elements:

- **Phrasing:** Phrasing is how you use your voice to group words together. When students speak with correct phrasing, they have a smooth rhythm and meter and don't read too fast or too slow. Sentences are smooth, not choppy. As they learn about phrasing, students use punctuation to guide them in when to stop, pause, or emphasize words or phrases.
- **Intonation:** Good readers change their voice as they read. As students learn to read with good intonation, they use rise in fall of the pitch or tone of voice as they read. They change the sound of their voice to match the text, stressing words or phrases as appropriate.
- **Expression:** Expression is how you use your voice to show feeling. As students learn to read with expression, they focus on matching the sound and volume of their voice to the text.

If students pause appropriately, use correct phrasing, or change their intonation and expression in response to the text, we can usually assume that they understand what they are reading. Their response to the text is a reflection of their processing of the text as they read. If they are unable to comprehend the text, or if they are still developing decoding skills, their reading of the text may resemble reading a list of unrelated words—reading in a monotone. If there is some comprehension of the text, their reading may be uneven—halting and monotone at some points, and fluid and with expressive at others.

1 Fluent reading involves more than speed

In the last few years we have seen an increased emphasis on the assessment of oral reading fluency (ORF). Evidence clearly demonstrates that oral reading fluency is related to reading comprehension. As a result, much of the fluency instruction in classrooms has focused on increasing students' reading rate so that they can meet the benchmark for the grade level and time of year.

However, if teachers base their instructional decisions solely on students' ORF scores, they may over-estimate students' ability to comprehend what they read. Recent research tells us that for linguistically diverse students—faced with the challenge of reading in a language in which they're not typically fully proficient—text-reading fluency is *not* a reliable indicator of reading comprehension. For example, across four studies conducted with linguistically diverse learners and/or low-performing learners, from the primary grades to grade 6, text-reading fluency scores were in the average range, yet the mean score for reading comprehension was well below average. This may be the case not just for ELLs, but also for many of their peers who are from low-income backgrounds with underdeveloped language and world knowledge.

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Goals such as ORF benchmarks are useful tools for educators, but teachers must keep in mind that there is variation among students and that the same reading rate may lead to different results. For example, Kung (2009) found that:

- A third grade ELL with an ORF score of 130 words correct per minute (wcpm) has a 61 percent chance of passing the Minnesota state test.
- A third grade monolingual English speaker with the same ORF score has an 80 percent chance of passing the state test.
- ELLs must read 150 wcpm to have an 80 percent chance of passing the third grade test.
- An ELL with high English proficiency and a score of 130 wcpm has a 68 percent chance of passing the test while one with low English proficiency has a 29 percent chance of passing.

The answer in response to the data presented here is not to work on getting students to read faster but also to build and monitor their language skills and develop their background knowledge so that they can understand what they read when they are reading at an appropriate rate. Strong accuracy and rate are important measures and must be combined with other key measures of reading to ensure the ultimate goal of building a strong understanding of text and enjoyment of reading.

2 Language factors can influence fluency

Research with ELLs indicates that many ELLs are able to develop good word-level decoding skills. However, they may continue to lag behind their peers on measures of reading fluency and comprehension. Research shows that language skills often play a significant role in these students' reading fluency. Students unfamiliar with English syntax are less likely to be able to anticipate what will come next in a sentence and therefore, approach each word as an independent word rather than as part of a sentence with meaning. Even when decoding is automatic, these language based factors may impact fluency:

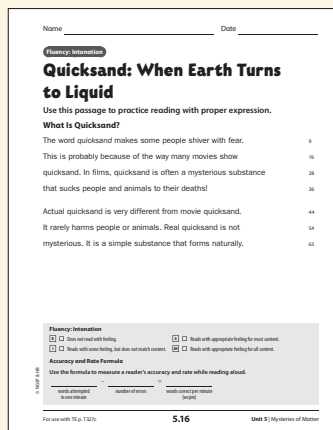
- Limited English vocabulary;
- Divergent background knowledge;
- Limited knowledge of English syntax and grammar and language transfer challenges;
- Phonics transfer issues; and
- Lack of familiarity with English morphology (word parts and the way words work).

These challenges are often balanced by benefit of oral fluency in students' home language. As we work to help students succeed, instruction must leverage the strengths ELLs bring to the classroom to gain knowledge of vocabulary, background, linguistic, phonetic, and morphological knowledge of English.

3 Instruction is designed to build fluency and comprehension

From the information above, we can see that it is not enough to make sure that ELLs have adequate decoding skills and practice in oral reading rates. To become fully fluent readers and enhance comprehension in English, ELLs need to develop rich vocabulary and knowledge of the world. They need to become increasingly familiar with English syntax, grammar, and morphology. And they need to develop deep knowledge of the meanings of words.

National Geographic Reach is designed to address all of these needs that impact ELLs' achieving full reading fluency and comprehension. As we have seen from the earlier articles in this section, *Reach* focuses on building students' academic and content vocabulary, increasing their background knowledge, teaching them the structure of English, and building strong comprehension strategies. Vocabulary lessons in *National Geographic Reach* provide extensive exposure to key words. When students have developed deep familiarity with words, they will be able to read and comprehend them in text. Content, language, grammar, vocabulary, and decoding skills are aligned around interesting academic topics that motivate students and support them in achieving high levels of comprehension.



Fluency lessons develop students' reading accuracy, rate, intonation, and expression.

In addition to this rich foundation of vocabulary and language, *National Geographic Reach* also provides specific practice to help students develop fluency. Resources include:

- Professional modeled readings and teacher read-alouds.
- Fluency models focusing on specific prosody skills.
- Frequent opportunities for oral reading, which is beneficial because it forces students to attend to each word (Francis, Rivera, et al. 2006).

- Repeated reading activities give students practice in reading texts multiple times until they are able to read them fluently and with good prosody.
- Multiple texts of varying genres and lengths on similar topics, which provides the opportunity to see and read words used in similar contexts across different texts.
- A rich array of Leveled Books, which offer additional opportunities to develop fluency as students read on topics of their choice.

These instructional resources provide a rich array of tools to support accuracy, rate, and prosody.

Finally, the components of *National Geographic Reach* include the online **Comprehension Coach**—an interactive, personalized computer application. This resource supports fluency development by allowing students to

- hear modeled, fluent readings
- record repeated readings and keep track of wcpm scores
- access coaching for pronunciation and point-of-use vocabulary and comprehension supports.

The **Comprehension Coach** can highlight text as it is read, identify mis-readings and provide feedback and tools to coach students. The speech recognition provides automatic assessment of accuracy and rate, saving instructional time and allowing teachers to focus on building comprehension skills. Students can use the **Comprehension Coach** to track their developing comprehension and fluency via an online resource. They can practice listening and reading anytime, anywhere. This creates a non-threatening environment that promotes more frequent practice and builds confidence.

Conclusion

For ELLs, the development of reading fluency involves more than automatic decoding and reading rate. Many ELLs need to develop more extensive vocabulary, wider background knowledge, and greater familiarity with English grammar, syntax, and word meanings in order to read with full comprehension and fluency. *National Geographic Reach* addresses these foundation needs and also provides extensive practice in oral and repeated reading to help ELLs achieve the highest level of understanding and fluency.