

# Instructional strategies that will promote literacy in an early childhood classroom for struggling readers

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on an issue that many teachers face with students who are learning to read. At some point, perhaps very often, teachers in an early childhood setting will encounter students who struggle with reading. The focus of this article is to discuss strategies that will help and encourage struggling readers and assist in closing learning gaps in reading. The strategies discussed in this article are repeated readings, Reader's Theatre, songs, and poems.

## Introduction

As a teacher, it can be frustrating and disheartening to see students be promoted to the next grade with minimal knowledge of the basic concepts of reading. The farther behind they get, the harder the teacher has to work to get them caught up. It seems next to impossible to help a student who is struggling when they are so far behind. "Reading requires readers to accomplish at least two critical tasks—they must decode the words and comprehend the text. Given the limited amount of attentional resources available to any reader, attention that is given to the decoding requirement cannot be used for comprehension" (Griffith and Rasinski, 2004, pg. 1). Year after year teachers will encounter struggling readers. It may be just one or it could be half of the class. Whatever the case, teachers must have a variety of strategies that are engaging and fun in order to assist struggling readers in their journey to becoming fluent readers. "In order for students to learn to construct meaning from text, it is necessary for teachers to apply instructional strategies that will help readers transition from simple decoding of words to fluent word identification" (Mraz, Nichols, Caldwell, Beisley, Sargent, and Rupley, 2013, pg. 165).

**Rasinski, Zimmerman and Bagert (2015) state:**

Many children who struggle in reading do not view reading as fun...Early experiences tend to shape long-term attitudes. Reading material that fails to engage young imaginations can trap children in failure; it can make children "hate" to read and become a near insurmountable obstacle to the development of age appropriate levels of reading achievement (pg. 5).

Teaching goes beyond the curriculum or the materials that are supplied to teachers. Strategies are the materials, delivery methods, and so much more that go into supporting a struggling reader. This manuscript will explore several different strategies that engage students in their reading and promote fluency and to provide teachers with several different ideas that can easily be implemented into the classroom. By utilizing one or more of these strategies in the classroom, gaps in reading achievement can decrease. Consequently, the number of struggling readers will become smaller.

## ***Repeated Reading***

Reading a passage more than once has many benefits. “Rereading the same passage repeatedly has been found to have a positive impact on both fluency and comprehension” (Mraz et al, 2013, pg. 165). When students reread, they become more familiar with not only the words in the passage but the meaning behind those words.

Studies have found that repeated readings leads to improved student word recognition accuracy, reading rate (a measure of automaticity), expressive and meaningful reading, reading comprehension, and confidence in reading, not only on the passages the students have practiced but also on new never-before-seen texts (Rasinski, Rupley, Paige and Nichols, 2016, pg. 169).

If repetition of a task can benefit people in a multitude of ways, then the same should prove to be true for reading. Rasinski et al, (2016) uses the following example as a way to portray the importance of repeated reading:

A music student, for example, will practice a piece under the guidance of an instructor who models and provides feedback to the student. The student will practice the repeated selection until he can hit all the notes automatically and begin to think about phrasing, emphasis, and other interpretive features of playing. The improvement from practicing the one piece will also carry over to improve playing on subsequent pieces never played previously by the student. (pg. 167)

This example shows the role of the teacher and student in a scenario of repetition. This can also work in the classroom, where the teacher is scaffolding through the lessons and providing feedback for improvement. Through continued practice, the student becomes more fluent and confident in decoding and comprehension. The positive effects of this practice continue as the student becomes a more independent reader and utilizes the strategies as self-directed.

Repeated readings can benefit struggling readers in many ways. “Reading the same passage repeatedly has been shown to significantly increase reading rate and accuracy, comprehension, and the benefits are carried over to unpracticed texts” (Mraz et al, 2013, pg. 165). However, the mode of implementing these readings is still an issue.

In many fluency programs, students engage in rote and somewhat mindless oral repetitions of texts for the primary purpose of increasing reading speed. We find students, especially students who struggle or are already unmotivated to read, often lose interest in such approaches (Rasinski et al, 2016, pg.169).

By using a variation of texts and strategies, readers will become engaged and reading for fluency will take place.

Performance based selections, where the students present or act out a selection that needs to be read repeatedly and rehearsed, are one possibility to use in order to combine repeated reading with a sense of purpose and enjoyment. “An action research study by Neumann, Ross, and Slaboch (2008) found that students respond best toward activities that include performances and repeated readings” (Clementi, 2010, pg. 87). There are many different performance-based texts that can be used, a popular choice being Reader’s Theatre.

## ***Reader's Theatre***

One way to instill a sense of purpose for reading is to put on a performance that involves the students interacting with one another in front of their peers. When students are able to perform, their attitudes toward a task become more serious and a purpose for reading is conveyed. "In addition to improving fluency and comprehension, Readers Theatre also engages readers and serves as a motivational tool for students. For struggling readers, motivation may be the key to their success in using this strategy" (Mraz et al, 2013, pg. 169).

Reader's Theatre is a fun alternative to reading as it allows students to interact with a text in a way that is not sitting in their seats listening to someone read or re-reading the passages themselves. Clementi (2010) states that students have specific parts to read, instead of memorizing lines, students read from scripts so they can focus on their reading. The wonderful part about Reader's Theatre is the amount of resources available for all reading levels. Not only can premade scripts be found, but also books and texts can easily be adapted into scripts as well. "Readers Theater can be easily adapted for use with all kinds of students in all grades and reading levels" (Clementi, 2010, pg. 85).

Introducing a Reader's Theatre strategy into a classroom is very flexible; there is no right or wrong way to do it. Clementi (2010) provides the following information:

Students should practice reading their scripts about 15 to 20 times. This typically occurs over three to four days and includes silent reading, paired reading, and group reading. Rereading the script is a crucial part of Readers Theater because this is when students develop their oral reading fluency. As students practice, their accuracy and speed increases, so they can focus on expression. (pg. 85)

Students can benefit greatly from reading a passage multiple times. Below is an example of a weekly routine for implementation in the classroom.

### *Pre-Day 1*

- *Teacher and/or students select story.*
- *Teacher and/or students prepare or write script.*

### *Day 1*

- *Teacher reads aloud the story.*
- *Students read script independently, in small groups, or as a whole class multiple times.*
- *Teacher and students discuss story.*
- *Students take home unmarked scripts for practice.*

### *Day 2, 3, and 4*

- *Students practice script in small and large groups, taking turns with different parts until later in the week when permanent parts are chosen.*

- *Students give each other compliments and suggestions.*
- *Teachers provide mini-lessons or coaching that explicitly teaches an aspect of fluency or prosody.*
- *Students highlight parts for specific characters.*
- *Students select permanent parts.*
- *Students take highlighted scripts home for practice.*

#### *Day 5*

- *Performance*

Reader's Theatre allows for repetition and reading for a purpose. Student motivation is increased, their fluency is improving and it allows the teacher the opportunity to provide feedback to students based on their assigned reading. This is a tremendous way for a teacher to foster growth and improvement with struggling readers.

It is difficult to ignore the success of this strategy. "In their study of second-grade, Title I students use of Readers Theatre, Millin and Rinehart (1999) observed increases in both oral reading fluency and reading achievement that transferred to other reading materials" (Mraz et al, 2013, pg. 169). Using a strategy that is fun and engaging for students is a great way to boost fluency and seeing the positive effects of such a strategy can be an amazing and satisfying feeling as a teacher.

### **Poetry and Song**

Another great strategy to promote fluency in the classroom is through poetry and song. "Thus, we feel that songs and poetry are naturals for promoting reading fluency, and that rhyming poetry has a strong potential for developing both competency in both phonics and fluency" (Rasinski et al, 2016, pg. 170). The use of poetry and song as a reading strategy can also be performance based, thus engaging the students in their reading and allowing for more fun.

When teachers use poetry as a strategy, Mraz et al (2016) suggest using a three-step approach. The initial step involves introducing word families as words in a list. Using word families boosts fluency as readers begin to start recognizing patterns in words. The ability to recognize patterns is a tool that is used by fluent readers. The second step moves from these words families in isolation to using them in a text. The final step would then be to take the word family words and put them into writing, creating their own rhyming poem.

Rasinski et al, (2015) state that perhaps the most immediate reason for bringing poetry into the classroom is that it is specifically identified as a text for instruction in the Common Core State Standards in Literacy (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). Indeed, poetry is included in the reading standards at every grade level from kindergarten through grade 12. When reading is made fun for students, their attention and engagement in activities are boosted. The very nature of poetry itself, the rhyme and rhythm embedded in poetry for young children, make poems

fun to read. Rasinski et al, (2015) explains that rhyme, rhythm, and repetition of children's poems invite multiple readings that have the propensity to increase comprehension, fluency, word recognition, and vocabulary of the reader. As it applies to phonemic awareness, by focusing on poetry's rhyme, alliteration, and assonance, young and struggling readers are attracted to the tempo, cadence and sound, of the text. Rasinski et al, (2015) also concluded that poetry should be a "matter of passion, not survival," we have found that poetry indeed can be a key to literacy survival for many students who struggle in learning to read.

Along with the idea of poetry and the rhythm that corresponds with it is song. Iwasaki, Rasinski, Yildirium and Zimmerman (2013) point out that a considerable amount of language activity we engage in as adults involves rhythmical words such as songs. Perhaps it is singing in places of worship, or the beginning of a sporting event, or singing along to the radio while driving, or just listening to one's iPod while walking in the neighborhood. If during these singing episodes we were provided with the written lyrics to the songs, we would be reading! For example, Biggs and colleagues (2008) discovered that the regular repeated singing and reading of songs by struggling middle school readers over a nine-week period resulted in reading achievement (seven months gain on average) than a comparison group of students in an alternative intervention. Song lyrics often are embedded with rhyme, assonance, and alliteration. This playing with the sounds of language through song can be a gateway to the development of phonemic awareness. The rhyming nature of most song lyrics also provides teachers with excellent texts for teaching word families (rimes) (Rasinski et al, 2016).

## Conclusion

The word "strategies" carries a multitude of meaning when it comes to reading instruction. It is the curriculum and the materials provided by these programs that help support struggling readers in a whole group, small group and one on one setting. Through a multisensory approach to reading, the students are engaged and learning is optimal. When reading is enjoyable, students are engaged and learning is taking place. Through different types of text, struggling readers can gain confidence and an interest in reading. Poems and songs enable students to find their rhythm in reading and language. Poetry has many key features that support early language learners, such as rhyme and repetition. Songs help to promote a rhythm and spark interest that might otherwise be lacking. Consequently, an interested student is motivated to read again. Additionally, evidence shows repeated reading is effective in promoting literacy in the classroom. The use of a performance-based strategy, such as Reader's Theatre, supports repeated readings while keeping the reader actively engaged.

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