

Using Repeated Readings to Support Fluency and Comprehension

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Abstract : A critical component of early literacy is fluency. Reading with fluency in early elementary school allows a student to find success in future reading. A student who cannot read fluently will have a limited understanding of the text. This manuscript addresses the importance of developing fluency and using repeated readings to develop this skill, and in turn, build comprehension. Through repeated readings, students build fluency with meaningful reading experiences. Studies show that repeated readings help students improve their reading at a rate that supports comprehension. Repeated readings are an effective instructional strategy used in the primary classroom to develop fluency (the ability to read with appropriate rate, accuracy, and expression) and reading comprehension (the ability to understand the text).

Introduction

Sarah is a first-grade student at the beginning of the school year. In kindergarten, she developed an understanding of letter names and sounds. She can decode three-sound words and is starting to understand more phonics patterns. Decoding is the ability to apply letter-sound relationships to read words. Sarah decodes words slowly and has not yet developed automaticity (the ability to read words automatically), which is an indicator of fluency. Sarah would read the following sentence, The cat sat on a mat in the sun, by each sound. Her reading would go as follows: The c-a-t s-a-t o-n a m-a-t i-n the s-u-n. Sarah has little reading fluency (the ability to read with appropriate rate, accuracy, and expression) and does not recall many passage details. She does not like to read. Students such as Sarah would benefit from regular use of repeated readings (reading a passage more than once) to develop the reading skills required to reach fluency. Repeated readings are an effective instructional strategy used in the primary classroom to develop fluency and reading comprehension.

Fluency: What is it, and why is it important?

Fluency is a critical component of literacy development. Strong decoding and word recognition skills are required for students to read fluently. Students develop decoding skills through systematic practice of phonics. Word recognition is the ability to see a word in print and quickly recognize the word. When a student has developed decoding and word recognition skills, the student can start to build fluency.

Fluency is a multifaceted skill that develops as a child encounters more complex reading. "Reading fluency refers to efficient, effective word recognition skills that permit a reader to construct the meaning of the text. Fluency is manifested in accurate, rapid, expressive oral reading and is applied during, and makes possible, silent reading comprehension" (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Teachers must understand the meaning of fluency to provide effective reading instruction for students. Fluency

skills are composed of appropriate rate (the ability to read words rapidly with automaticity), accuracy (the ability to correctly recognize words in print), and expression (the ability to read with proper phrasing and emphasis) (Hasbrouck, 2014).

Students can have strong skills in letter-sound correspondence (recognizing the sounds letters make) and blending phonemes (individual sounds) to form words but cannot yet read fluently. Reading passages can be frustrating and tiresome when students spend energy on each letter sound to form a word. This is because the more cognitive energy (energy the brain uses to process information) readers spend on sounding out individual words, the less cognitive energy they have to devote to comprehension. More importantly, the need to sound out individual words may take the joy out of reading and lead to a dislike or avoidance of reading.

Fluency Misconceptions

Reading rate is an essential component of reading fluency but not the only component. Children and educators can develop the misconception that being a strong reader means being able to read fast to reach a word count per minute (WCPM) goal. A WCPM measure is often a component of benchmark assessments. Benchmark assessments provide information on reading ability, indicate the start of interventions, and track growth. Benchmark assessments provide valuable information, but fluency misconceptions can develop when educators only consider reading speed when assessing fluency. Students must also read with accuracy to read fluently. For a person to read something accurately, they will read at different speeds (Pearson, 2006). The accuracy of reading will affect comprehension.

Fluency assessments acquiring a WCPM score typically do not consider comprehension or expression. A WCPM assessment that does not account for comprehension simply measures who can read quickly (Pressley et al., 2005). Educators need to consider comprehension of material when evaluating student reading. Reading with expression and prosody (using phrasing and expression) (Rasinski, 2004) must also be considered when assessing fluency since reading with expression gives meaning to the text.

Appropriate Growth in Reading Rate

Reading rate will improve through high-quality instruction and purposeful reading experiences. A weekly improvement rate of two to three words per minute on oral reading fluency passages would assist below-level readers in reaching grade-level fluency goals (Fuchs et al., 1993). Making weekly gains of two to three words per minute will build fluency abilities at an appropriate rate to support text comprehension. Repeated readings are an effective strategy to help students reach fluency goals.

Repeated Readings

Repeated Readings to Develop Fluency

One of the most well-supported strategies to help children develop reading fluency is repeated reading. “The NRP [National Reading Panel] concluded that guided oral

reading, including repeated reading, is the most effective technique for improving word recognition, speed, accuracy, and fluency” (Birsh & Carreker, 2018, p. 376). Repeated reading is reading the same passage several times, with the intention of reaching a reading goal. The student will make improvements in fluency each time a passage is read. Even though repeated reading involves reading the same passage, the skills developed will translate into future reading.

Repeated readings are well known for being used as an intervention tool to help below-level readers. During interventions, a student can use repeated readings in ability groups or one-on-one with a tutor or teacher. The student should be exposed to a modeled reading of the passage before reading independently to understand the intended reading skill to be developed. An adult or more developed peer can provide the modeled read (Rasinski, 2014).

Educators can use repeated readings with the current curriculum for reading and phonics instruction. Suppose the current curriculum topic focuses on instruction and practice with digraphs (two consonant letters that make one sound). In that case, the text that the teacher selects for repeated reading should include many digraphs. This will further develop phonics skills, decoding, and word recognition. A repeated reading containing the current instructional phonics pattern will allow students to apply decoding and word recognition skills to reading a meaningful text.

Repeated readings can also be differentiated. Students who are below reading level would benefit most from reading decodable texts (a passage with words that students have already learned while introducing words with the current phonics skill focus). Decodable texts are beneficial because students read a passage containing words that are readable with their existing skill set. Students can develop automaticity with previously learned words and practice decoding unknown words. On-level students would benefit from a passage containing current phonics patterns and exposure to new phonics patterns. Above-level students would benefit from repeated readings that require higher-level phonics skills and provide more practice with prosody. Passages should be at an appropriate level of reading difficulty to support growth.

The independent reading level is ideal for texts that students read without assistance. If students are reading for enjoyment, the text should be at an independent level with a 97-100% accuracy rate. Students will find success in word reading accuracy to support comprehension at this level. The instructional reading level is ideal for repeated reading passages. The instructional level allows students to have appropriate decoding and word recognition challenges to grow their reading ability. Enough challenge is present for students to experience new words and practice skills and strategies but not too challenging to the level of causing frustration. These students should be reading texts with a 90-96% accuracy rate. If students are reading at 90% accuracy or below, the text causes frustration, and the students are less likely to build and develop skills needed to read fluently. Comprehension of the text will also be minimal at the frustration level (Rasinski, 2004).

Approaches to Implement Repeated Readings

Repeated readings will be most beneficial when used regularly. There are several approaches to repeated readings that encourage active engagement and excitement

about reading: choral reading (Birsch & Carreker, 2018), partner reading (Goldsmith-Conley & Barbour, 2011), individual reading, reading with an auditory model, recorded student reading, small group reading, individual reading one-on-one with a teacher or tutor, poetry (Faver, 2008), and reader's theater (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Different repeated reading strategies will support varying purposes for reading the text. A teacher must consider the intended reading goal or learning outcome when selecting a passage and variation of repeated reading.

Home-to-School Connections

Parents can be eager to help their child improve their reading but unaware of how to help. Educators can support parents with materials and directions to foster reading development. A passage can be sent home weekly with a below-level student. The teacher could also provide modeled recorded readings of the text to parents with limited English and literacy skills. For best results, a conversation should occur between the teacher and parents to provide instructions, including frequency of use and variations to the reading of the passage. The child could read the passage three times a week and answer general comprehension questions to support the development of reading skills.

The Connection Between Fluency and Comprehension

Regular use of repeated readings will allow students to grow in reading rate, accuracy, and expression. Students develop automaticity in reading by quickly identifying a word in print. Quicker word identification will improve the rate of reading. "The theory of automaticity suggests that with increased speed and accuracy of reading subskills (e.g., letter-recognition, decoding), cognitive resources become available for reading comprehension of connected text" (Patton et al., 2010, p. 101). Automaticity can be improved through repeated readings and will allow the reading rate to improve while simultaneously increasing comprehension.

Reading with automaticity will help lessen the cognitive energy required to decode. The mental focus of the reader can be transferred to making meaning of the text when fluent reading occurs. Students may have the cognitive resources and abilities to comprehend the text but cannot comprehend it because all energy has been spent on decoding and recognizing words in print (Rasinski, 2012). Little comprehension can occur when cognitive resources are no longer available to make meaning out of what has been read. The studies in Table 1 support the effectiveness of using repeated readings to develop fluency skills, which in turn will aid comprehension.

Table 1
Repeated Reading Studies

| Strategy | Method Used in an Example Study | Results from the Study |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Fluency Development Lesson (FDL)</p> <p>This framework is a daily lesson in which students read a new passage. Sessions include teacher modeling, assisted practice choral reading, partner reading, and independent passage reading.</p> | <p><i>Rasinski, 2017</i></p> <p>Educators completed a study with six struggling fourth grader students using the FDL framework during a 12 week period. The students were reading at an average of a second-grade reading level before the study.</p> <p><i>Zimmerman et al., 2019</i></p> <p>The FDL framework was studied in a 5 week period to measure the strategy’s effectiveness in a program such as a summer reading session. The study included 30 students.</p> | <p>Students made an average growth of one year and one month in reading achievement and almost doubled in word reading fluency</p> <p>Students made average gains of 2.14 words per minute per week</p> |
| <p>Poetry</p> <p>Repeated readings can include poems to improve reading performance.</p> | <p><i>Wilfond, 2008</i></p> <p>Lori Wilfond developed the Poetry Academy, a program designed to help students improve their reading through repeated poetry reading. 86 students were involved in the study. Students worked with a volunteer and engaged in the following steps.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The volunteer modeled the reading. • The child and volunteer read together. • The child read independently. • The child read the poem at home. • The child read the poem to the volunteer one week later. | <p>Evaluators compared students in the program to a control group. Students in the Poetry Academy made significant growth on curriculum-based assessments, word count per minute, and word recognition scores. Students in the Poetry Academy made, on average, a 45.06 growth in words read per minute</p> |
| <p>Readers Theater</p> <p>Students practice reading and performing a script. There is a focus on prosody and reading for meaning rather than speed.</p> | <p><i>Young & Rasinski, 2009</i></p> <p>A study was completed over a second-grade academic year. 29 students engaged in regularly occurring readers’ theater productions. Each day, a different focus and lesson plan for the script was used.</p> | <p>Improving reading speed was not the goal of this study. Students were reading for comprehension and using expression while reading. However, the students in this class made average gains of 65 words per minute over the year</p> |

Repeated Readings to Improve Comprehension with Skilled Readers

Once automaticity has been achieved, repeated readings can be utilized to develop comprehension skills and strategies. Comprehension is the primary reason to read. “Several readings of a worthwhile text may be necessary for students to process most of the ideas and information—literal and inferential—and to remember the main points. The richer or denser the text, the more this is true” (Moats & Tilman, 2019b, p. 193). Using repeated readings for comprehension teaches a child that reading a text more than once is acceptable if the information is not understood after the first

read. Strong readers go back and reread portions of a text when confusion occurs. More details and connections are made to the text with repeated reading.

Repeated readings can be used for various elements of comprehension. Each read of a repeated reading text can have a different purpose. This purpose can be tailored to fit the instructional topic of a current reading curriculum. If the focus of reading instruction is identifying story elements of a fiction text, three repeated readings could go as follows. First read: Students listen to the text read aloud with the focus of determining the characters and setting. Second read: Students engage in a choral read of the material to determine the problem in the text. Third read: Students read the text in a whisper voice independently with the focus of determining the solution to the problem. The teacher can also pose different questions to support deepening comprehension levels with each text read. The teacher could ask about other potential solutions to the problem presented in the text or further develop the lesson to include a more in-depth analysis of the characters and their roles in developing the problem and solution.

Components of reading are intertwined and continuously being developed and strengthened as a child progresses into more in-depth reading skills. Students develop new skills in decoding, word recognition, and prosody. Using repeated reading for comprehension allows the teacher to use the text to teach comprehension strategies while simultaneously giving students fluency practice. This instructional strategy can also be used in content area disciplines to support understanding and acquisition of new concepts. Repeated readings are versatile and can be easily adapted to include the focus of any comprehension strategy with fiction and nonfiction texts.

When Should Repeated Readings Begin?

Repeated readings are adaptable to all reading levels and grade levels. Students begin building word recognition skills in kindergarten and first grade. Fluent readers use word recognition skills to read words with automaticity (Rasinski, 2012). Repeated readings will help build early automaticity skills. Repeated readings do not need to be lengthy and should be started as early as kindergarten or first grade.

Educators should intervene in early elementary grades to provide students with high-quality instruction. The older a child gets, the more difficult it can be to fill the achievement gap in reading through interventions. Students in early elementary school are learning at a critical age for developing foundational reading skills such as building fluency skills to support comprehension. If a child is identified and provided with interventions later in elementary school, the child will likely continue to be behind in fluency skills (Moats & Tolman, 2019a). Using repeated readings in the primary classroom will help students succeed in their current and future reading.

Considerations for Implementing Repeated Readings in the Classroom

Deciding to incorporate repeated readings into regular classroom instruction will benefit all readers. There are several considerations to determine how this strategy will best fit into a primary classroom's current reading curriculum and structure.

- In which setting would the teacher like to use repeated readings: Whole class instruction, partner reading, individual reading, small groups, one-on-one interventions, or a combination of settings?
- Where can time be found in the regularly scheduled routine to incorporate repeated readings?
- What types of texts will be used for instruction?
- How can repeated readings fit into the current reading curriculum to support the grade level's phonics patterns and comprehension strategies?

After these considerations have been made, educators can smoothly incorporate repeated readings.

Conclusion

When Sarah entered first grade, she had the skills necessary for reading success in kindergarten but displayed a need for further development in fluency. It is now nearing the end of first grade, and Sarah has an entirely different view and skill set for reading. She has spent the last several months engaging in many repeated readings and experiencing various texts in her classroom. Sarah cannot wait to open her own copies of beginning chapter books at home. She is reading for entertainment and understanding the stories she enjoys. Sarah's story reflects how repeated readings helped develop her fluency skills, supported her comprehension of the text, and in turn, resulted in a new love and excitement for reading.

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