

“RESEARCH-BASED TRANSFORMATION OF TEACHER EDUCATION: TRADITION AS A BASIS FOR INNOVATION”

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THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING READING IN LANGUAGE UNIVERSITIES (TEACHING READING FLUENCY)

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***Abstract.** This article deals with the importance of teaching reading in language universities. Develops fluency simply by finding a quiet spot and practicing a text several times through, the reality is that there needs to be a coach to model, guide, and encourage in order to make that practice as valuable as possible. Below we identify the various direct instructional roles taken by a teacher or coach in nurturing reading fluency.*

***Key words:** fluency, creating fluency, activities, extensive reading, expression and automaticity, the use of story.*

Fluency in any activity is achieved largely through practice – the actor rehearses, the athlete talks about repetitious training drills, “the musician spends time daily practicing pieces that will eventually performed, and the novice driver spends as much time on the road as possible. Often, that practice involves the repetition of a particular line, skill, movement, or composition many times. So too, in reading fluency is achieved through practice – wide reading for some readers, repeated practice of particular pieces for others. Accomplished readers are often able to achieve and maintain their fluency through wide and independent reading. Even young successful readers can move toward higher levels of fluency through independent reading as found in sustained silent reading and its various permutations.

However for many young and struggling readers at all ages, repeated readings seems to be an essential method for achieving fluency. Jay Samuels’ (1979) seminal work on the method of repeated readings found that when students orally practiced a piece of text they improved on their reading of that text – rate, accuracy and comprehension. Such an accomplishment is to be expected. However, he also found that when students moved to new passages, their initial readings of those new pieces were read with higher levels of fluency and comprehension than the initial readings of the previous passage, even though the new passage was as difficult or more challenging than the previous piece. Since Samuels work, other studies have demonstrated the value of repeated readings as an instructional tool for reading fluency and, because reading fluency is related to text understanding, to reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003).

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Independent repeated readings might work for readers who are already sufficiently accomplished readers that they are able to evaluate and monitor their own reading. However, for most younger and struggling readers repeated readings need to be under the guidance of a teacher or coach. This is where direction instruction in fluency comes in. In the same way that an actor is guided by an acting coach or director, the athlete by a trainer or coach, the musician by a teacher or conductor, the novice driver by a driving instructor or parent, the young or struggling reader involved in reading fluency instruction needs the assistance and guidance of a teacher. The reader’s coach can select appropriate materials, model fluent reading, provide assistance while reading, evaluate progress within and between passages, give encouragement, and celebrate successes.

While on the surface it may seem that the reader develops fluency simply by finding a quiet spot and practicing a text several times through, the reality is that there needs to be a coach to model, guide, and encourage in order to make that practice as valuable as possible. Below we identify the various direct instructional roles taken by a teacher or coach in nurturing reading fluency.

Less fluent readers may not know what it means to read fluently. Readers need to develop an internalized model of fluent reading. In the current environment where reading speed has become the proxy for reading fluency, students may think that fluency is nothing more than reading fast. This is clearly a less than optimal conception of fluency; yet many students seem to have gotten it in their heads that fluency is reading fast and they direct their reading efforts to reading as fast as they can. Reading speed may be an indicator or measure of the automaticity component of fluency, but reading speed is not automaticity and it is not fluency.

The best way to counter the idea that reading speed is fluency and to help students develop the understanding that fluency is reading with meaningful expression and automaticity is for a teacher, parent, or coach to read to students regularly in a fluent manner and then to direct students’ attention to how that reading was fluent – what made it fluent. Conversely, the teacher, parent, or coach could read to students in a nonfluent manner (monotone, staccato-like, excessively slow or extremely fast) with a follow-up discussion that focuses on how such a reading was not as meaningful or satisfying as a more fluent rendering of the passage.

Students need to practice, through repeated readings, their own reading as well as listen to fluent readings by others. And practice without feedback may result in students’ reinforcing their errors or practicing to achieve the wrong goal (e.g., increase reading speed without regard to expression). Teachers need to take on a

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direct coaching role as students read orally during fluency instruction. They need to listen to students read and give formative feedback to their reading. Teachers can note particular areas of concern in students reading; give praise for strong efforts, and direct students to read in a particular manner (e.g., read this passage with enthusiasm, with sadness, with boredom, etc.). This sort of coaching helps direct students' attention to areas that will allow them to develop their fluency and use it to increase text comprehension.

In the role of fluency coach, teachers can also monitor students' progress in reading fluency. On a regular and systematic basis, the teacher might record samples of students' oral reading and evaluate the recording for automaticity (reading speed) and prosody (reading expression). Progress or lack of progress can be shown through charting students' performance over time. Analysis of trends can lead to lesson planning that is aimed more precisely at students' needs.

Research into fluency has shown that assisted (also called paired, neurological impress, audio-assisted, or duolog) reading (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003) can have a significantly positive effect on students' fluency. In assisted reading an individual student reads a passage while simultaneously listening to a fluent reading of the same text. The fluent rendering of the text can be a more fluent partner or a pre-recorded version of the reading. In many classrooms teachers set aside a time of each day for students to engage in assisted reading with a coach or peer. In other cases, teachers create a listening center in which students are expected to spend some time each day reading while listening to an audio-taped recording of the book.

However, we think it is also important for the teacher to take on the specific role of fluent reading partner for students with particular needs in fluency. No doubt, the teacher is the most fluent reader in any elementary or middle school classroom. During the assisted reading period the teacher may pair up with an individual, pairs, or small groups of students and read orally with the students as they read orally on their own. Being integrally involved in such lessons allows the teacher to personally monitor each and every student in her classroom, and to act as a personal model or trainer for students. Even more significantly, by being involved with students in this daily read along routine, the teacher demonstrates first hand to students that fluency is important; so important that she is willing to take time each day, time she could have used for other duties, to read with students in her classroom. That is a very profound message indeed.

Fluency instruction normally involves assisted, repeated (practice or rehearsal) and oral reading. (We must note however, that fluency is also manifested in silent

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reading through the inner voice that only the reader hears). These activities require resources that may not normally be available in a classroom. The informed fluency teacher, then, must take on the role of text collector and developer to make her classroom ready for fluency instruction.

For example, a teacher may decide to set up a listening center so that students can read books while listening to recorded versions of the book (assisted reading). The teacher needs to acquire the hardware necessary to play the recordings (e.g., tape recorders). More importantly she will have to find or develop the recorded versions of the texts she wishes to stock in the listening center. Fortunately, more and more publishing companies are making recorded versions of texts. However, the teacher may also want to think about recording the passages herself or having some of her students (fluent readers as well as those still working on fluency) record passages after having practiced them to the point where they can be read fluently (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998).

There is something special about reading a text while listening to a recorded version of the text produced by one’s teacher or classmate.

Certain texts lend themselves to practice and oral performance, and these texts are not normally found in great quantities in basal readers and other textbooks. Poetry, songs and song lyrics, rhetoric, plays (usually in the form of readers theater scripts), and other texts written with a sense of the author’s voice are among the texts that we find lend themselves most fittingly to fluency instruction. Not only can these texts be read orally and repeatedly, they also lend themselves to oral interpretation where the reader uses his or her voice to convey meaning and emotion. At its heart, fluency in any endeavor requires practice. Whether you are trying to become fluent with a musical instrument, a sport, writing, or reading, you need to practice your craft in order to become fluent at it. In reading, the practice too often (and unfortunately) involves mundane repeated readings of dry passages that are often informational.

Informed teachers see practice as essential, and attempt to find material that is meant to be performed. If the passage, whether it is a song, script, speech, or poem is meant to be performed, it has to be rehearsed or practiced repeatedly. The performance of a passage makes the practice meaningful to students. They will want to perfect their reading so that the performance is as good as possible.

Teachers, then, need to think about how they can allow students to perform their material. Some teachers use Friday afternoons as a time for a “Poetry Café.” During the last 45 minutes of every Friday, the lights are dimmed and the shades are drawn -- low level lighting is used to create a coffeehouse mood. A bar stool is set up at the

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front of the classroom, and so is a microphone attached to a karaoke machine. Students are the Teachers, then, need to think about how they can allow students to perform their material. Some teachers use Friday afternoons as a time for a “Poetry Café.” During the last 45 minutes of every Friday, the lights are dimmed and the shades are drawn -- low level lighting is used to create a coffeehouse mood. A bar stool is set up at the front of the classroom, and so is a microphone attached to a karaoke machine. Students are the main audience, but parents, teachers, the school principal, and other classrooms are invited to participate in the poetry readings. A parent may bring in popcorn, drinks, and other appropriate refreshments. Students love the authenticity of the performance and it leads them to rehearse their readings even more diligently – they know they have will be performing for an audience. . main audience, but parents, teachers, the school principal, and other classrooms are invited to participate in the poetry readings. A parent may bring in popcorn, drinks, and other appropriate refreshments. Students love the authenticity of the performance and it leads them to rehearse their readings even more diligently – they know they have will be performing for an audience. .

Perhaps the central role of the teacher in direct fluency instruction is to develop and set in motion instructional routines in which reading fluency is the focus. An instructional routine is simply a set of instructional activities aimed at developing a particular skill in reading that is implemented on a regular schedule, usually on a daily or weekly basis.

Many commercial programs currently exist for teaching reading fluency and are based on the central instructional concept of practice or repeated readings. Most of these programs consist of informational texts that are meant to be practiced until a certain reading rate is attained. We think this is a corruption of effective instruction in reading fluency for several reasons. First, the texts employed, informational texts, do not lend themselves easily to reading fluency development. They are meant to be read silently and they are usually written in a third person disembodied voice, one that does not lend itself to reading with expression (the voice that an author incorporates into his or her written text). We are also concerned that such approaches to repeated readings gives the goal of the rereading mechanistically until the passage can be read quickly. As we have mentioned earlier, while speed in reading may be an indicator of automaticity in word recognition, speed is not reading fluency and should not be used as an explicit goal for instruction.

Thus, in this paper, we argue again that repeated reading works best when the practice or repeated reading is aimed at recreating the voice of the author who wrote

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the text – to read with appropriate expression and meaning. Since informational texts do not necessarily lend themselves to expressive renderings, we need to look for other text types of genres that do tend to be written with voice. And to that end, we think of texts such as narrative, poetry, rhymes, scripts, dialogues, monologues, jokes, cheers, song lyrics, oratory, and other such texts as the appropriate materials for authentic and effective fluency instruction.

Given appropriate texts and teacher roles, what might direct authentic fluency instruction look like? The manifestations of direct fluency instruction can be as diverse as teachers and their styles of teaching. In this section of the paper we share several models of direct and authentic fluency instruction that have proven effective in working with struggling readers.

Most literature concerning the use of story in the language learning classroom focuses on the practical application of the genre to language teaching, including methods for choosing appropriate tales and activities to foster participation (Bagg, 1991; Morgan and Rinvolucci, 1988; Hendrickson, 1992) or the potential for using stories in teaching English as a Second Language (Haulman, 1985; Yuhua, 1999). This literature primarily discusses the benefits to student motivation and understanding. Cantoni (1999) describes the method of Total Physical Response Story reading to Native language education, claiming that this type of activity is likely to reduce the learners’ ‘affective filters’ and to provide the type of scaffolding outlined by Vygotsky (1986). Those who justify the inclusion of narrative in the indigenous language classroom do so on the basis of cultural relevance, the centrality of the historical oral narrative to cultural transmission, and the traditionally didactic nature of the oral narratives in a given community (Heredia and Francis, 1997; Ramirez 1999; Yuhua 1999). There is little discussion of the role of story in creating identity and community in the classroom, though. None of the authors advocating story use in the language classroom describes instructors’ motivations behind the use of personal and traditional narrative. Personal narratives often function as a means to create or enhance identity, particularly ethnic identity (Draper, 2003). Stories may also be used to reconnect to a homeland from which the teller is removed temporally, physically, or emotionally (Behar, 1996). Similarly, traditional narrative can function to effectively recreate a cultural identity, personal or community, for successive generations (Palmer, 2003). It is no stretch of the imagination to suggest that stories may be used to like ends within the multicultural classroom. Instructors may use personal and traditional narrative to illustrate their own identities, as members of a Native community and as authoritative instructors. They may also use stories to

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create a sense of classroom community, and to introduce students to a linguistic community.¹

The difference in student background between the community and university classes has significant impact on the form of dialog used. The university class is comprised of mostly non-Native students.

A primary method of contextualizing the vocabulary in the university classes is through cultural narrative. The cultural content of context for the basic conversational forms and vocabulary domains, such as food ways, leisure activities, and modes of communication.

Cultural content contextualizes the traditional oral literature and the variety of grammatical forms employed in fluent speech. Switch reference marking within sentences plays a significant role in fluent story performance. Students may also become familiar with the prevalence of multiple meanings of a morpheme when used in different contexts.

Though the students appear to enjoy the stories, the structure of the course and its assessment techniques do not readily permit evaluation of the effect of these stories and their method of delivery on students’ linguistic or cultural learning. Additional research aimed at discovering the relationship between this method of story use and learning outcomes is needed. Such research may find that this method of story-based instruction is more effective at imparting communicative competence, though less effective at imparting linguistic competence. Differences in uptake among Native and non-Native students may also emerge, as might differences based on students’ other prior cross-cultural experiences. Evaluation of the effectiveness of storytelling in second language instruction is notably infrequent in the second language acquisition and teaching literature, as is empirical study of type-of-instruction effect (Norris and Ortega 2000). Investigation of this type of story-based instruction, therefore, potentially offers a wealth of information relevant to the fields of second language instruction and native language revitalization.

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¹ Teaching stories: Cultural and Educational Uses of Traditional and Personal Narrative in the Choctaw Language Classroom Liz Kickham, *University of Oklahoma*. LeRoy Sealy, *University of Oklahoma*

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