



Academy of
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Practitioners
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Fluency Matters

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Fluency of the five goals of reading stressed in the Reading First program incorporated into the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (PL 107-110). This legislation is the blueprint for elementary education in the United States for the next several years. Because fluency is a major part of this legislation, it will get major attention (Stahl, 2004 P.187)

The National Reading Panel (NRP), in compiling recent research on reading acquisition, devoted a full chapter to the importance of fluency (2000). The research evidence and instructional implications are clearly documented in the NRP report. The panel suggested that “Fluency depends upon well-developed word recognition skills, but such skills do not inevitably lead to fluency” (p. 3-1)

Many of us who work with children with dyslexia know that improvement in decoding accuracy doesn't always improve fluency. Anna Gillingham and Bessie Stillman were well aware of the necessity to enhance fluency as well as accuracy. They understood the importance of blending sounds of letters rapidly and smoothly to make words; this was practiced through the visual card drills. As children learned more and more letters and their corresponding sounds, more and more “little yellow” words from the Jewel Case “...are exposed one by one by the teacher and read as rapidly as possible by the pupil” (1956, p.52). The number of words read in three minutes were graphed so children could see their progress. Surely, the intent of Miss Gillingham and Miss Stillman was to promote automatic word recognition leading to fluency. They understood that the non-phonetic, or irregular, words such as *want*, *who*, *once*, and *friend* must also be learned to automatically, and could be taught in a multisensory way repeating only letter names rather than sounds.

Stanovich (1980) urged as not to confuse fluency and automaticity as identical constructs. He defined fluency as the speed of decoding that is gained as one masters the alphabetic code. In contrast, automaticity is the immediate recognition of words. I believe that gaining automaticity is useful in obtaining fluency. Automaticity for upper levels includes Learning the Automaticity for upper levels includes learning the common morpheme patterns such as prefixes, Latin and Greek word roots, and suffixes. Learning these patterns to automatic levels will help children read polysyllabic words more effectively and more fluently.

Activities to Strengthen Fluency

Numerous activities leading to increased fluency are available to teachers for both single word reading and passage reading. One-minute speed drills are often used for increasing fluency while reading lists of single words. Several commercial programs are available for teachers. Teachers can also compile lists of words containing patterns their students have learned, or lists of non-phonetic words, for such drills. Graphing the increase in speed provides motivation for the learner.

For passage reading, Mather and Goldstein (2001) suggested that teachers count out 100 words in a passage and time the student as he or she reads the passage; then calculate the students reading rate by dividing the number of words read correctly by to total amount of reading time. They estimate that mid-second graders typically read about 120 words per minute (WPM), mid-third graders read about 150 WPM. I should note that estimates of average reading speed vary widely among reading researchers.