

Focus on Fluency

Strategies for Classroom RTI Instruction

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Abstract

Teachers today are challenged to fit all academic requirements into the school day. This makes the inclusion of reading fluency strategies for struggling readers very difficult. Reading fluency is an important component of the reading process and can be used as an indicator of reading proficiency. In order to become a fluent reader, students must become proficient in automaticity, prosody and accuracy. When these three components are mastered, the brain is able to focus on the higher-level skill of reading comprehension. It is possible for teachers to learn and incorporate new reading fluency strategies into the daily classroom routine by using methods such as wide reading, repeated reading or Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI) in the reading block as well as at other times during the school day. Additional practice activities help to engage and motivate students as they work on reading fluency skills.

Focus on Fluency

New and challenging standards have pushed many teachers I know to repurpose their instructional time for the reading of difficult texts and text-based writing. But that doesn't mean we can forget the basics! I work with teachers who cannot find the time to fit in all necessary instruction during the school day. Adding time to address reading fluency strategies for struggling students may add another layer of stress. Learning new strategies to help these students is yet another time commitment. However, effective fluency work can be acquired and incorporated into daily instruction with a little planning, preparation, and creativity.

Reading Fluency

It is a difficult to define fluency, as it encompasses every aspect of reading (Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001; Schwanenflugel, Kuhn & Meisinger, 2010). Many researchers define reading fluency as the rate that a reader accurately recognizes words within a connected text (Burns Kwoka, Lim, Crone, Haegele, Parker, Petersen & Scholin, 2011; Speech & Ritchey, 2005). In a connected text, words are linked as in a phrase or sentence, rather than appearing as a list of words. By contrast others agree that accuracy, automaticity and prosody should be included in the definition of reading fluency, as in Figure One (Rasinsky & Hoffman, 2003). Automaticity is the ability to read words without conscious thought and accuracy is the ability to pronounce words found in print successfully. Prosody is the expressive intonation and phrasing used when one reads (Walpole & McKenna, 2007).

Research has shown that oral reading fluency can be used as an indicator of overall reading proficiency (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001). In addition, fluency

builds on the foundation of oral language skills, phonemic awareness, knowledge of alphabet letterforms and decoding skills. Fluency can be associated with foundational skills including phonological awareness, letter name, and letter sound knowledge that are below the word level (Ritchey & Speece, 2006). In fact, letter sound fluency measures can be a predictor of reading fluency in the kindergarten and first grade years (Ritchey & Speece, 2005; Speece & Ritchey, 2006).

There is a correlation between oral reading and student achievement (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Students who are fluent readers can easily read texts and many demonstrate good comprehension skills (Rasinski, 2012; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Schwanenflugel et al., 2010). Good comprehension strategies include predicting both before and during reading, visualizing by using prior knowledge to create a graphic picture, and inferring by using clues to draw conclusions about text information. Additional strategies include retelling the story, finding the main idea and synthesizing content information (Walpole & McKenna, 2007). In the classroom setting, reading fluency occurs during oral reading, silent sentence reading, reading connected text, and silent paragraph reading.

Automaticity in Reading

Reading fluency is a critical component of reading development that greatly influences a student's academic success (Schwanenflugel et al., 2010; Meisinger, Bloom & Hynd, 2010). Work with reading fluency does not come at the expense of reading comprehension. LaBerge & Samuel's (1974) theory that word recognition automaticity allows the brain to focus more on comprehension continues to be a useful reading theory

(Schwanenflugel et al., 2010). Automaticity encompasses speed, effortlessness, autonomy and a lack of conscious awareness (Schwanenflugel et al., 2010).

Automaticity is the ability to immediately identify a word in print with no conscious effort. Automaticity can be developed through automatic word recognition and text skills recognition through wide range exposure to print. Once students become fluent readers, the brain is able to focus on other processes such as reading comprehension (Schwanenflugel, Kuhn, Morris, Morrow, Meisinger, Woo, Quirk & Sevcik, 2009).

Strategies

It is important to address a student's poor reading fluency through specific strategies and procedures in order to increase reading rate, accuracy and prosody (Begeny & Silber, 2006). Being proactive and addressing fluency at the beginning of the reading process may help prevent fluency problems later on (Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001). It is possible to achieve fluency gains at both the word and connected text level (Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001; Hiebert, 2005; Marcell, 2011). Figure Two displays how the strategies are connected, and Figure Three describes fluency strategies.

Fluency strategies do not need to solely be implemented in an individual instructional situation. Strategies can also be carried out in small and large group settings, as group-based fluency strategies have been proven to be effective (Begeny & Silber, 2006; Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001). Small group fluency instruction in particular can be very successful in improving student reading fluency (Begeny & Silber, 2006). Fluency lessons can be implemented into a classroom's daily differentiated small group reading instruction.

Wide Reading

One method that can be used to increase fluency is wide reading. Wide reading uses a large assortment of reading topics and materials to engage students in the reading process (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009). When participating in wide reading, students read several books during the week with teacher support, rather than reading just one single text repeatedly throughout the week. Wide reading exposes students to a broad range of reading materials, and can lead to improvement in prosody, word recognition and reading comprehension (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009; Kuhn, 2005). Teacher's supports of wide reading can include modeling, expressive reading, echo reading, and choral reading (Kuhn, 2005). Wide reading can increase student accuracy and reading rate as well as prosody and comprehension (Kuhn, 2005).

Repeated Reading

Repeated reading is another technique that can be used to improve fluency (Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001). Repeated reading involves reading one text continually until a predetermined reading level is achieved (Rasinski, 2012; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). As a student continues to read the same text, fluency rate should increase as word errors decrease (Walpole & McKenna, 2007). Repeated reading has been found to improve word recognition accuracy, automaticity and comprehension (Rasinski, 2012). Prosody is also improved by using repeated reading (Kuhn, 2005). In addition, the repeated reading process has been found to help students successfully read subsequent new passages (Rasinski, 2012).

Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction

Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI), developed by Stahl and Heubach (2005), is a comprehensive intervention that has led to positive results in improving reading fluency. This intervention was originally designed for classrooms where the majority of students were reading below grade level (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009). FORI is intended to be used with a basal reading program during a five day week. The process utilizes teacher modeling, repeated reading, echo reading, and partner reading. With FORI, one story is read repeatedly throughout the entire week. Initially, the teacher introduces a text, reading the selection to the class as she models fluent reading. He or she will then lead a discussion focusing on comprehension and key vocabulary words. The next lesson entails students echo reading the selection, and sending the reading selection home to read for homework. The selection is read chorally on the third day, and is again assigned to read for homework. On the fourth day, partner reading is utilized as well as other extension activities. The teacher assesses reading fluency on the final day by asking individual students to read the story on a one-on-one basis (Walpole & McKenna, 2007; Schwanenflugel et al., 2009; Hiebert, 2005; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003).

Modeling

Modeling fluent reading by either a teacher or a peer can be an effective fluency strategy that has a positive effect on students (Chard, Vaughn & Tyler, 2002). Reading is modeled when a skill or strategy is demonstrated in the correct manner (Walpole & McKenna, 2007). For example, a teacher may model how to read fluently and with expression. Pre-recorded books can also be used as a model to increase fluency (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003).

Paired Reading

Paired reading is an additional way to increase reading fluency (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009). When engaging in paired reading, a struggling reader is matched with a strong reader. The stronger reader modifies his or her reading level to the less fluent partner. Each takes turns reading, with the less fluent partner signaling when he or she begins to struggle. The more fluent partner then begins to read again. As the students read, the more fluent partner corrects decoding errors as they occur (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). Partners should change weekly which is beneficial to the less fluent reader (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). Paired reading has proven to be a very successful strategy that helps increase both accuracy and reading comprehension (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003).

Echo Reading

Echo reading is a strategy that is easy to implement. To echo read, a teacher reads a passage to students, a sentence or two at a time, and then students orally read the same sentences as a group. Echo reading can be used in both large and small group settings. It is an additional way to provide repeated reading practice (Walpole & McKenna, 2007).

Choral Reading

Choral reading is another way to help increase reading fluency. When choral reading, a teacher leads an entire group as they read aloud together. Choral reading provides a significant level of support from the teacher (Walpole & McKenna, 2007).

Choral partner reading is another type of choral reading. It entails a teacher modeling a short passage or sentences, and then the partners orally read the same passage or sentences together (Walpole & McKenna, 2007). Both choral reading techniques help students to practice fluency while also focusing on reading comprehension

(Schwanenflugel et al., 2009). As students choral read, the teacher can observe them to measure progress. This process can be used with basal reader stories, short passages, commercially made resources or poems. Multiple copies are needed as students are reading the material at the same time (Walpole & McKenna, 2007).

Previewing and Preteaching

Other ways to improve reading fluency are previewing passages and preteaching key vocabulary words (Berninger, Abbott, Trivedi, Olson, Gould, Hiramatsu, Holsinger, McShane, Murphy, Norton, Boyd & Westhaggen, 2010; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). To preview passages, a teacher reviews upcoming readings with students in order to familiarize them with future assignments. Preteaching vocabulary words involves reviewing key vocabulary words that will be featured in readings to be introduced in the near future. In addition, increasing the amount of reading in which a student engages in can result in fluency growth (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003).

Using Multiple Strategies Together

It can be advantageous to use more than one of these instructional practices, depending on the needs of the student (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009; Begeny & Silber, 2006). FORI incorporates several other fluency strategies into instructional practice. Additional strategies can also be incorporated in wide reading and repeated reading instruction as well. Some of the strategies that can be used in conjunction with repeated reading, wide reading and FORI include teacher modeling of expressive reading, paired reading, echo reading and choral reading (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009; Kuhn, 2005). In addition the combination of repeated and modeled reading can improve fluency. This process may include students listening to a text that is read to them and then reading it

themselves, or listening to a pre-recorded text while reading it at the same time. It may also involve reading to a partner who provides assistance with unknown words (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). Previewing passages and preteaching vocabulary can also be combined with most of the other strategies that have been previously discussed.

Fluency Activities for the Classroom

In conjunction with the aforementioned reading fluency strategies, fluency activities can assist in promoting automaticity, prosody and accuracy, which encompass the components of reading fluency (Schwanenflugel et al., 2010; Berninger et al., 2010; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003) as depicted in Table One. Fluency activities are a motivating and engaging way to supplement fluency interventions. They present an opportunity for individual and group practice of fluency skills that have been focused on during classroom reading instruction. These activities are an additional way to help increase reading fluency.

Fluency Activities for the Word and Phrase Level

The first group of activities addresses fluency at the word and phrase level. They focus on repetition, accuracy and automaticity. When working on fluency at the word level, you may want to use either the Dolch sight word list or the Fry sight word list. The Fry list includes 1,000 common words that make up 90% of all written language, and all 220 Dolch words are incorporated into the Fry word lists. See Figure Four for websites containing Dolch and Fry word lists as well as additional word level fluency activities. Also, the same word cards or word phrases can be used for several of the activities.

Another suggestion is to use vocabulary words that are being focused on during the weekly reading lessons.

Bang

This activity is for two or more students. Materials you will need include a timer and at least 30 word or phrase cards. These can be 3 x 5 cards or cards made from card stock. Sometimes I cut 3 x 5 cards in half for this game. As students learn the original words, continue to add more words to the basket. For every 10 word cards, add an additional “bang” card. Students sit in a circle, next to one another. Both the word cards and “bang” cards are placed upside down in a box or basket. Students take turns choosing and reading word cards from the basket for a set time, usually five minutes. If the card is read correctly, the student holds onto that card. If a student misreads a word, it is put back into the basket. Students that select a “bang” card must place all their cards back into the basket. Once the timer goes off, students count their word cards. The student with the most cards wins. This is a fast moving game that keeps all students engaged and motivated.

Popcorn Game

This is a variation of the bang game. Instead of index cards, words or phrases are placed on popcorn cutouts and “pop” is written on several of the kernels. Students place all of their popcorn cards back in the container when they choose a card containing the word “pop”. I put the popcorn cards in a plastic popcorn container that I bought for \$1 at a dollar store. See Figure Five.

Pick a Stick

This is yet another variation of Bang. This time, write the words or phrases and “bang” on wide popsicle sticks and place the sticks in a tall container.

How Many Can You Read?

How Many Can You Read? is a noncompetitive variation of Bang. The “bang” cards are removed from the set. Students set the timer and try to read as many words as possible during the allotted time. Each time they play, students try to improve upon the number of cards read correctly. Sometimes I have students work together to discover how many cards they can read collaboratively in a given time period. I have found this to be a great team building activity as well as a fluency activity.

Roll and Read

This activity is for two or more students. Provide students with a paper containing 12 words. Students take turns rolling two dice, and reading the word that corresponds to the number rolled. You will need two dice and a paper containing twelve numbered words.

Find a Word/Phrase

This is an activity for two or more students. You will need to make two copies each of 20 word or phrase cards. Students use word or phrase cards to play a go fish type game. A student distributes four cards to each player. Students take turns asking each other for specific word cards. If the student asked has the specific card, he/she is given that card and places the two matched cards on the table in front of him/her. The student with the most pairs of cards at the end of the game wins.

Read Listen and Learn

This activity works best with either individual students or pairs of students. A card reader is used for this activity (Figure Six). The only materials needed for Read Listen and Learn are a card reader and blank card reader cards. Both the reader and cards are available through educational supply companies. However, card readers used to be very popular in elementary schools. Check with your reading teacher to see if there is one in a closet somewhere in your school. Write a sight word, or another targeted vocabulary word from your reading series, on individual blank cards and then record your voice saying one word on each card. Small phrases can be written on the cards as well, if that is what your students need to work on.

Students will listen to teacher selected cards by putting them through the card reader. They will then record themselves reading the same word. Then students listen to themselves reading the word. I have found that students thoroughly enjoy this activity, especially listening to themselves read the words. The repetitive nature of Read Listen and Learn helps students to really learn the words.

Fluency Activities for the Text Level

The next group of activities addresses fluency at the text level. They address accuracy, prosody and automaticity. These activities focus on reading connected text.

Whisper While You Work

This activity is for individual or small groups of students, depending on the materials you have on hand. For Whisper While You Work, you will need some type of audio device, a c.d. player, computer, tablet or tape recorder, along with a prerecorded story and a hard copy of the same story for students to read. Students are asked to use

their finger to track words as they whisper read with the prerecorded story. Using an audio model can be an effective way to increase fluency (Chard et al., 2002). See Figure Seven.

Be a Buddy

This is a buddy reading activity designed for two students. You will need a short story or part of a text for each student. Students take turns reading a short text to each other. Pairing a strong reader with a weak reader can be an effective way to help increase reading fluency (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009).

Read and Record

Read and Record can be used with either individuals or a pair of students. Materials that are needed for this activity include a recording device (tape recorder, tablet) and a short story or paragraphs from a text. After practicing reading a short text or paragraphs several times, students record themselves reading the text, practicing prosody, and accuracy. They then listen to themselves on the recording. You may want to provide students with a checklist to rate themselves on their accuracy and prosody. In addition, students can be asked to complete a graphic organizer to monitor their reading comprehension.

Poem Power

This activity is for either individuals or small groups of students. Provide a copy of a poem for each student. Poems can be collected and placed in binders, or commercial books of children's poetry can be used. Students can practice reading the poem aloud either individually or in a group. Poems are great for practicing prosody and phrasing (Rasinski, 2012).

Sensational Songs

This is a fun whole group activity, but can also be used by individual or small groups of students as well. It is a great way to practice fluency, prosody, and automaticity (Rasinski, 2012). Materials needed are copies of songs for each student. You can collect a packet of songs or an already published book of children's songs to use for this activity. You will need to create a songbook. It is best to place songs in a binder so that additional songs can be added during the year. Plastic sleeves can be used for durability. A computer, CD player or tape recorder is also needed in order to play the songs. The teacher chooses songs for the class and prints copies of them for students. Sometimes I let students request songs to sing. As the song is played, students track the words of the song as they sing along. See Figure Eight.

Websites That Address Fluency

There are many websites that address reading fluency. Several are discussed below (See Figure Nine). One site, named Dr. Young's Reading Room originates from Texas A&M University, has an entire section on Readers Theatre (Young, 2013). Readers Theatre is an authentic way to practice reading fluency (Rasinski, 2012). In Readers Theatre, students perform using a script but do not use sets, costumes or memorization. Students practice their character parts, working on fluency and prosody, and eventually perform the play to an audience, with a script in hand (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). This site provides information about Readers Theatre including step by step instructions as well as background information and numerous story scripts that can be printed out and used in classrooms.

The website Reading A-Z provides a multitude of fluency information, activities and assessments. It also contains leveled readers that can be used to practice reading fluency (Reading A-Z, n.d.).

Read Naturally (Read Naturally, 2014) is a program created specifically to address reading fluency. The Read Naturally process includes an initial cold read, reading a story several times with a recorded model, timed reading practice and a final hot read. Students keep track of their progress through a personal graph, monitoring reading rate and word errors. After reading a story, students answer comprehension questions. Once students become familiar with the Read Naturally routine, they are able to complete most of the steps independently, except for the cold and hot reads.

Quick Reads is a program that focuses on reading complex text. It addresses vocabulary, fluency and background knowledge at a student's reading level through a specific instructional routine (Pearson Instructional Resources, n.d.). The Quick Reads lessons are only about 15 minutes in length. The repeated reading and modeling strategies are used with this program and choral reading can also be utilized. Comprehension questions are individually answered and then discussed about each story.

Final Words

Research over the years has demonstrated that fluency instruction is an effective way to increase reading skills. Reading fluency is an important skill that is a bridge between word recognition and comprehension. Although it may be challenging to carve out the time, reading fluency strategies should be included as part of the school day for struggling readers. This can be achieved by integrating fluency instruction into the reading block. Fluency activities can be incorporated into those small pockets of time

during the day such as morning work, after recess or even as a final activity at the end of the school day. It is beneficial to pair fluency activities and strategies to reinforce skills and provide students with additional practice. Whether embedded in a reading curriculum, or by using teacher-designed lessons, it is important that reading fluency is incorporated into the daily school routine.

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Pause and Ponder

What is your definition of reading fluency?

What reading fluency interventions do you find most effective?

How can you add more reading fluency interventions for struggling readers in your daily instruction?

Why does reading fluency come easily to some students and is much more difficult for other students?

Take Action

- Reflect on your reading fluency instruction and how you can improve it.
- Think about the variety of fluency strategies available. Incorporate a new fluency strategy in your reading instruction.
- Review the activities mentioned in this article. Prepare and introduce new fluency activities in your classroom.
- Consider additional engaging activities that can be used with your students to improve reading fluency.

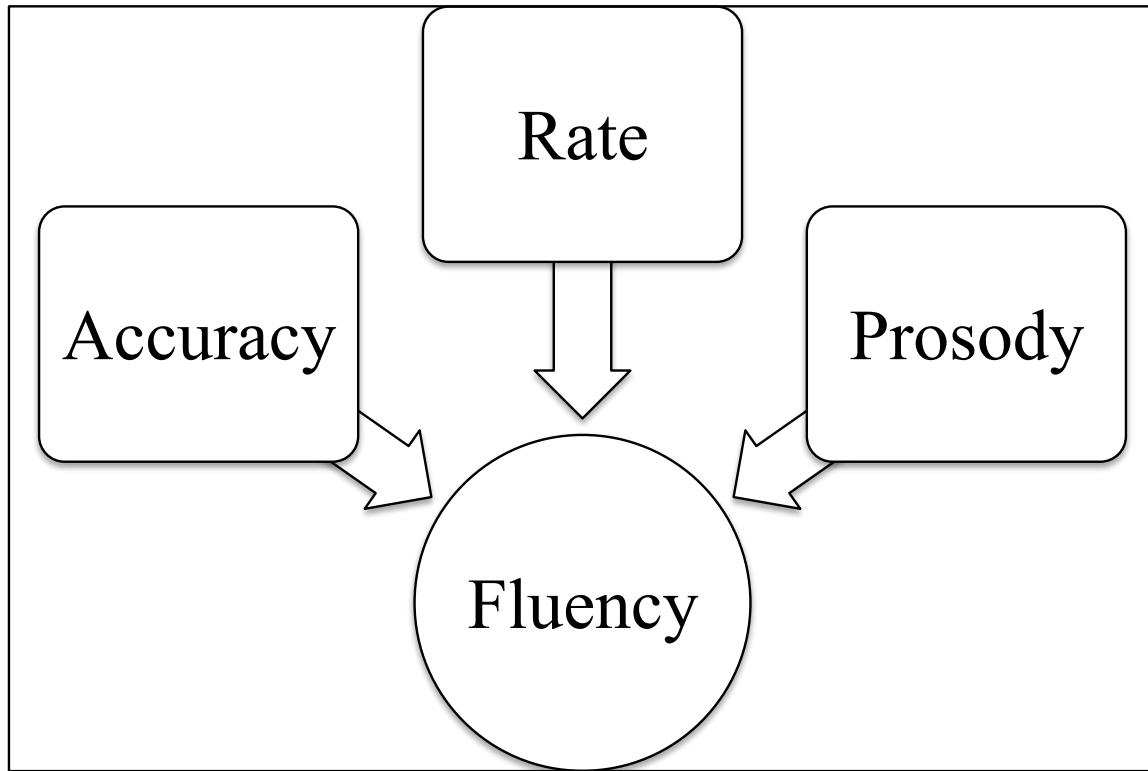


Figure 1 Components of fluency

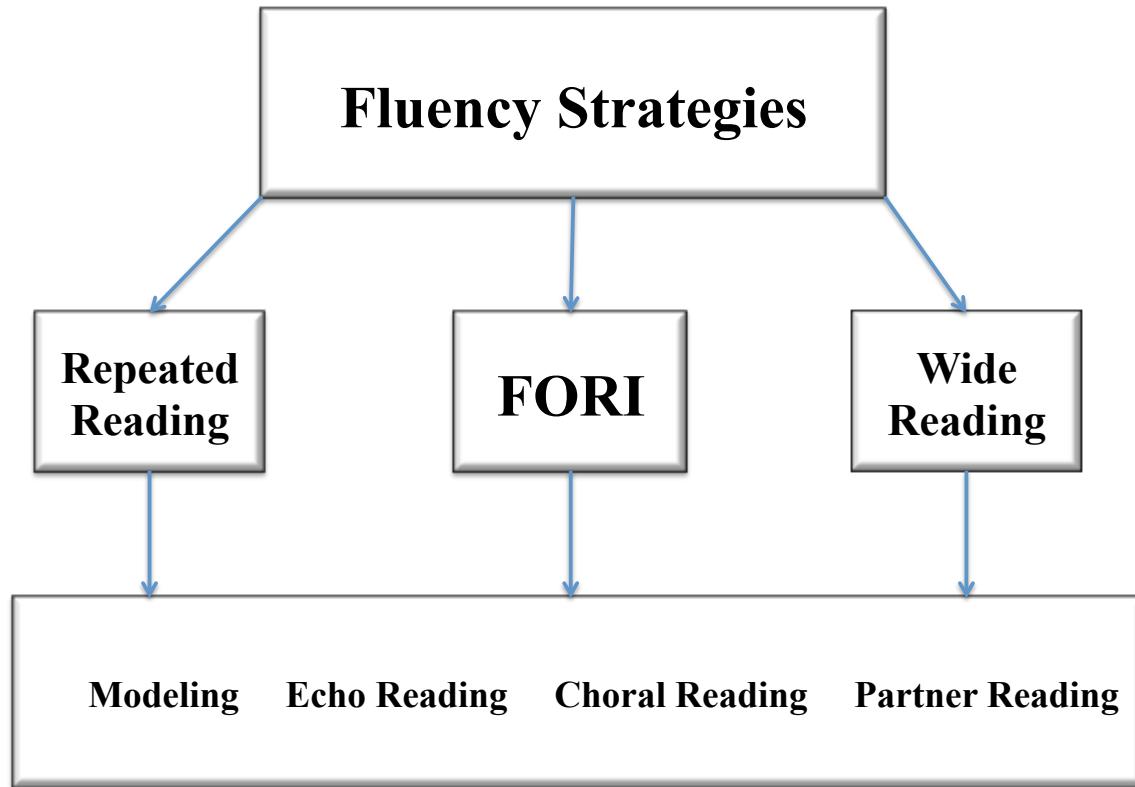


Figure 2 Fluency strategies

Strategies	Description	How to Use
Wide Reading	Use wide variety of reading materials, exposing students to a broad range of reading materials. This engages and motivates students in the reading process and helps to improve word recognition, reading comprehension and prosody.	With teacher support, read several new stories each week with students.
Repeated Reading	Read one text continuously during the week to increase word recognition, automaticity and comprehension.	With teacher support, students read only one story each week.
FORI	A program designed to be used with a basal reading series. It uses teacher modeling, repeated reading, echo reading and partner reading.	Using one story per week, teacher focuses on a different type of fluency intervention each day, including teacher modeling, repeated reading, echo reading and partner reading. Comprehension and key vocabulary words are also included in the process.
Modeling	Teacher models by reading passage aloud.	The teacher reads a passage demonstrating good prosody, accuracy and automaticity.
Paired Reading	Students read text in pairs. The teacher pairs a strong reader with a weak reader.	As students take turns reading, the weaker reader signals when he/she begins to struggle. Also, the stronger reader helps corrects decoding errors as they occur.
Echo Reading	Repeated reading after the teacher reads.	Teacher reads a sentence or short passage and then students read the same sentence or short passage.
Choral Reading	Teacher models the reading of a text.	The teacher reads part of a text. Students read the same text after the teacher.
Previewing/Preteaching	Teacher helps familiarize students with upcoming readings.	Before introducing a new story to the class, the story and new vocabulary are reviewed.

Figure 3 Description of Fluency Strategies

Fluency Activities	Accuracy	Automaticity	Prosody	Word Fluency	Phrase Fluency	Text Fluency
Bang	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Popcorn	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Pop	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Whisper While You Work	✓	✓	✓			✓
Be a Buddy	✓	✓	✓			✓
Roll and Read	✓	✓		✓	✓	
How Many Can You Read?	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Read and Record	✓	✓	✓			✓
Find a Word/Phrase (Go Fish)	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Read Listen and Learn	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Poem Power	✓	✓	✓			✓
Funny Voices	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sensational Songs	✓	✓	✓			✓
Just Breathe	✓	✓		✓		

The School Bell website includes a comprehensive Dolch sight word kit. It includes organizational and record keeping suggestions as well numerous games and student practice. The School Bell site is user friendly and is my favorite sight word website.

<http://theschoolbell.com/Links/Dolch/Contents.html>

K-12 Reader provides a list of all 1,000 Fry sight words.

<http://www.k12reader.com/worksheet/fry-words-complete-list/>

The Curriculum Corner has Fry sight word activity suggestions.

<http://www.thecurriculumcorner.com/>
thecurriculumcorner123/2012/07/06/fry-word-activities-for-all-words/

Figure 4 Suggested websites for Dolch and Fry sight words and sight word activities.