Fluency Instruction for Adolescents: Evidence from Research and Practice

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This conceptual paper addresses fluency instruction and assessment for students with or at risk for reading disabilities. Although a multidimensional construct, fluency tests more often have been limited to measuring students' reading rate and accuracy. The reasons for this are explained as well as how fluency tests have influenced classroom instruction in ways not supported by research. Specifically, an argument is presented against using fluency scores to restrict the texts that students are assigned to read. Then, the basis for having students repeatedly read a single text is described along with literature suggesting this common practice may not lead to expert reading performance. Finally, the paper presents recommendations for forms of fluency instruction that are supported by research as well as a promising practice aligned to those recommendations, called Varied Practice Reading (VPR). The basis of VPR, its components, and the early results of implementation studies in Grades 4 and 7 also are described.

Keywords: **Reading fluency instruction, reading fluency assessment, reading disabilities, Varied Practice Reading**

INTRODUCTION

Fluency, particularly the rate at which a reader can process words accurately, has been associated with reading ability in the middle grades (e.g., Clemens et al., 2017; Sabatini et al., 2019). As first identified by LaBerge and Samuels (1974), reading words with automaticity frees cognitive resources that would otherwise be devoted to decoding individual words. Because working memory has a limited capacity (Baddeley, 2012), puzzling over multiple small units does not leave room for stringing together larger chunks of text to grasp their meaning. Although automaticity is important to achieving comprehension, rate and accuracy still are not the sum total of the fluency construct.

Rather, fluency comprises a number of component skills that are observable only when someone reads aloud and, thus, are related to oral language ability (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019). For example, a fluent reader groups words together into meaningful phrases, places emphasis on certain syllables, reads with a faster or slower pace to match the tempo of the action in a text, raises or lowers voice pitch to reflect emotion, pauses to maintain correct meaning in phrases and to add emphasis, uses intonation within sentences, and demonstrates expression across sentences. All of these qualities—collectively referred to here as prosody—are indicative of processing text fluently and with understanding, but they are difficult to measure because they largely require subjective judgements (Godde et al., 2020). Much like writing a text, reading a text aloud involves personal style that makes each individual's reading

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somewhat unique. Thus, evaluating prosody, such as with rubric ratings, can be more prone to opinion than when merely counting words read correctly.

This conceptual paper addresses the ways that students' fluency commonly is measured and taught in schools as well as the implications of the prevailing approaches. In addition, it identifies fluency instructional practices that are aligned to research and describes new directions in the field.

Causes and Consequences of Measuring Fluency Rate and Accuracy

A core principle of response to intervention or a multi-tiered system of support is that students at risk for reading disabilities are identified as early as possible so that they can receive preventative instruction and, if necessary, increasingly intensive instruction (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Early identification necessitates testing children when they are still developing basic reading skills like letter-sound knowledge or single-syllable word reading (Ehri, 1995). These types of skills lend themselves well to being measured by rate and accuracy of identification and are indicative of children's future reading success (Solari et al., 2014). Yet, measuring oral reading rate and accuracy has been popular into adolescence for a couple reasons.

First, comprehension may be the primary expectation for reading in the middle grades and above, but measuring comprehension is time consuming (Petscher et al., 2017). Rather than the 30 to 45 minutes it takes to read several passages and answer questions on them, fluency tests would be considered more time efficient in that each student reads aloud for only 3 minutes total with a few additional minutes spent listening to directions and transitioning. Second, comprehension ability grows slowly in adolescence (Ricketts et al., 2020), so it is not reasonable to gather data frequently or within short timespans to monitor progress. Although rate and accuracy scores also do not change rapidly nor dramatically as students advance into the middle grades (Ecklund et al., 2015), fluency tests offer multiple forms of similarly short duration that allow a measure to be administered repeatedly so that student performance can be graphed to identify a trend and rate of improvement over time. This is beneficial for monitoring students' progress in interventions (Christ & Desjardins, 2018).

Despite the appeal of testing fluency rate and accuracy, the widespread use of these measures has been attributed to concerning instructional practices. In general, the approach has been to match the classroom activities to how students are assessed, as detailed in the sections that follow. These examples raise issues about the consequential validity of fluency rate and accuracy measures because the instructional practices described suggest the measures are influencing teaching in ways not intended in the test development nor supported by valid inferences that can be made with the test scores (Messick, 1995).

Limiting Access to Text

One way that fluency assessments have had disparate instructional consequences for students with reading disabilities is in the kinds of reading material to which they are given access. Specifically, accuracy scores—alone or in combination with comprehension scores—have been used for almost 80 years to match students to text deemed to be at the optimal level of difficulty (Betts, 1946). For example,

a common recommendation is that students practice fluency with independent- or instructional-level text, which is defined as text that can be read with 95-100% (independent) or 90-94% accuracy (instructional; e.g., Osborn et al., 2003). Similarly, teachers might apply a fluency assessment's proficiency cut score for reading automaticity as the expectation for how quickly and accurately a student should be able to read an assigned text. However, fluency assessment cut scores are not designed to be used for matching students to authentic texts that they would read for instruction or enjoyment.

That is because the measures are developed to reduce form effects by having specially written texts that control the vocabulary and syntax so that the different passages offered in a given grade level can be considered of equivalent difficulty (Santi et al., 2016). Thus, the cut scores for proficiency are not intended as thresholds for how quickly and accurately a student should read any text other the assessment passages. Consider that the cut scores on many measures have increased over the last decade, raising the expected performance by 5 to 12 words correct per minute (Hasbrouk & Tindal, 2017). Yet, the updates to the Hasbrouk and Tindal norms were not made because the researchers determined that students just needed to read faster now. Rather, the updates came because schools changed from administering passages they self-selected from their textbooks to using commercially available, standardized oral reading fluency assessments with equated passages (Hasbrouk & Tindal, 2017).

Nevertheless, teachers may still believe that if students cannot read a classroom text at the rate their commercial fluency test suggests they are fluent, then the students should be given easier reading material (Northrop & Kelly, 2018). In fact, middle school teachers have reported that the primary reason they do not devote more time to reading texts or using their textbooks was the belief that students would have difficulty reading the materials (Murray et al., 2022). In schools that administer fluency tests, teachers conceivably would be using those scores among other potential literacy data to make judgments about what texts to assign or how much reading students should do in their course materials.

Using a test's fluency norms as the reason for denying students the opportunity to read complex texts carries unintended negative consequences for those students because they would have less exposure than their peers to the kinds of language and content for which all students may be held accountable on state summative assessments and need for advanced comprehension (Compton et al., 2014). This may explain why using leveled text has not proven useful for improving the skills of students with reading difficulties (Hiebert, 2017). To the contrary, multiple studies have suggested that providing students some degree of scaffolded challenge while reading complex or challenging texts is what helps grow their language and strengthen their skills (Brown et al., 2018; Lupo et al, 2019; Shanahan et al., 2012). This has included when specifically working on students' reading rate (O'Connor et al., 2010).

Repeated Reading

Perhaps the most common way that fluency rate and accuracy tests have influenced instruction can be seen in the proliferation of repetitive reading practice in classroom interventions (Zimmermann et al., 2021). For beginning readers, this may involve drilling with letter, word, or phrase cards. But by the middle of first grade on,

repeated reading typically is characterized by pairs of students timing each other as they read a single passage three times each and provide each other feedback on errors (Chard et al., 2009). Often, students only read for a minute, so they are not expected to finish the passage before starting back at the beginning again. Such an approach to practicing fluency skills is consistent with how students are assessed. That is, repeated reading focuses on tracking and increasing the number of words students read correctly per minute.

The theoretical basis of repeated reading activities is derived from motor-skill training for athletes, musicians, and dancers (Smolkowski et al., 2016). Referred to in the literature as deliberate practice with a goal of achieving a criterion level of expert performance, an individual may rehearse select subskills or components that are tricky or problematic and gradually build to exhibiting smooth integration and delivery of all parts forming the complex act (Ericsson, 2020). Compared to motor skills, there have been fewer applications of deliberate practice to achieve expert performance in cognitive skills, such as chess playing (Moxley & Charness, 2013), but its features are apparent in how repetition is used in classrooms to build the cognitive skill of reading fluently. Specifically, students are assigned to rehearse the words and sentences that make up a connected text to achieve a criterion level of rate and accuracy. Students with reading disabilities might even be asked to set a series of interim goals and chart their progress toward attaining the rate and accuracy criterion.

However, using this type of goal for instructional purposes risks communicating to students that expert performance is defined as reading quickly and automatically—to the exclusion of reading with any prosodic elements (Kuhn et al., 2010). Despite rarely being the focus of intervention research, prosody has been linked to comprehension across languages (Wade-Woolley et al., 2022). This is reflected in the fact that expert readers do not simply read fast all the time; they know how to moderate their reading rate as needed to maintain or convey understanding. Moreover, expert readers may re-read a portion of text to repair a breakdown in comprehension, but they do not read every text repeatedly.

In other words, expert reading performance reflects not only automaticity, but also conscious effort. Research on deliberate practice stresses that an expert has control over all the contributing skills and can call upon them to flexibly and efficiently respond to differing circumstances when performing the complex act (Ericsson, 2020). Repeated reading potentially might not foster this kind of control because students raise their rate and accuracy of the practice passage by becoming acquainted with it and being able to anticipate the words and when they will be encountered in that specific text. Thus, findings suggest that improvements in automaticity achieved from repeatedly reading one passage do not consistently transfer to unrehearsed passages more generally (Lee & Yoon, 2017).

Recommendations and Future Directions for Fluency Instruction

Because using fluency norms to match students to text and having students read the same passage multiple times under timed conditions are common in classroom interventions but not well supported by research, it is important to identify what teachers should be doing instead. This is especially true as students advance into upper elementary and middle school where weak reading skills affect students' learn-

ing in content area classes (Reed et al., 2017; Westrick et al., 2020). Recommended approaches to supporting fluency development in Grades 4-9 include demonstrating and practicing prosodic reading skills as well as providing opportunities for students to read a variety of texts (Vaughn et al., 2022). If students are asked to reread a text, they should be given a different purpose for doing so, such as to answer questions or identify unfamiliar words (Vaughn et al., 2022).

A new approach being investigated, referred to as Varied Practice Reading (VPR), incorporates these recommendations (Reed, 2019). In VPR, sets of three or four different passages are written on the same topic so that 85% or more of the unique words used in the first passage also are used in the subsequent passages (see sample passage set in the Appendix). This gives students with reading difficulties repeated exposure to a common set of words, as would be the case with repeated reading. But unlike repeated reading, the words in VPR passages appear in different semantic and syntactic contexts so that students cannot anticipate when nor how the words will be used. Rather, they practice reading the words across a greater variety of fictional and informational passages that gradually increase in difficulty. The approach draws upon statistical learning in which increasing the contextual diversity allows a student to identify regularities of the words' usage that help build knowledge while ruling out information that is irrelevant to understanding the words (Joseph & Nation, 2018; Rosa et al., 2017).

When students read the VPR passages, they are not timed, but their partners are asked to mark and provide feedback on any errors made. Error correction has been a common element of repeated reading interventions (Zimmermann et al., 2021), so it was applied in VPR for the similar purposes of (a) giving partners a reason for listening and (b) giving readers an opportunity to correct their use of the words before encountering them in the next passage. Research suggests that when statistical learning of the language is incomplete, directly pointing out patterns can improve word reading performance (Treiman & Kessler, 2022). However, the primary focus in VPR is on reading with prosody. The listener in the VPR pair is asked to tell the partner whether the reading sounded natural and like the partner was talking. Students also set and reflect on personal fluency goals that include reading with expression and reading in a way that helped with understanding the passage—as opposed to quantifying their words read correctly across passages that are not equated.

An initial study with fourth graders found that students randomly assigned to VPR statistically significantly outperformed students randomly assigned to repeated reading after 12 weeks of using VPR 3 or 4 times per week (30 total sessions; Reed et al., 2019). Although implemented as a class-wide intervention in the core literacy block, the students who benefited the most were those typically identified for a Tier 2 reading intervention. Teacher and student feedback on VPR was positive, indicating that there was greater interest in reading the different passages as opposed to repeatedly reading just one passage.

An expanded version of VPR is currently under development for Grades 6-8, with passages that focus on science and social studies concepts and associated vocabulary words commonly taught in middle schools. In this way, the reading intervention time will be leveraged to prepare students for accessing grade-level text in their content area classes. In addition to completing the procedures described for

fourth graders, middle school students independently will answer comprehension questions and a writing prompt about the passages after reading them with their partners. This provides a new purpose for students to return to the passages and review information. A proof-of-concept study with seventh graders found that, in one semester of implementation, students in the VPR intervention significantly improved their performance on standardized measures of science, social studies, and vocabulary (Reed & Aloe, 2020).

Summary

It is important to keep in mind that fluency measurement was designed to be an efficient means of detecting risk for reading difficulties—not as the model for fluency instruction. When used inappropriately, the consequential validity of the measures is threatened because they have a disparately negative impact on the students who are denied access to complex text or who lose precious instructional time focusing narrowly on their reading rate and accuracy. Expert readers are prosodic and can call upon all component skills to adjust to the reading demands of different texts. Helping students progress toward expert performance requires more than rehearsal of single texts. Rather, fluency practice can offer students repeated exposures to words in different contexts and a focus on reading naturally over reading quickly.

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APPENDIX

Sample Grade 4 Varied Practice Reading Passages[1]

KAYLA AND THE PUPPY

Kayla pulled her shiny wagon down the street. She heard crying and discovered a tiny puppy at her feet. He was all alone on the sidewalk! Kayla wanted to bring him home, but she knew her parents wouldn't allow it unless he behaved. She only had an hour before they came home. She gently placed the puppy in her wagon and continued along. She could make this work!

Now home, Kayla put together a cardboard box, a blanket, and chew toys for the puppy. With that out of the way she could begin his training! But when she told him to stay, he stood up and howled. Kayla tried to scoop him up but he squirmed away. She threw chew toys but he still didn't listen. Nothing worked! Kayla felt so frustrated she could cry. How was she supposed to keep a puppy who didn't listen?

She sat and began to sing a song that never failed to lift her spirits. The puppy perked up and started to sing along! Kayla was happy to see that her training was finally showing some success. She couldn't wait to show her parents her new, musical puppy!

TALENT SHOW PUPPY

A musical girl, Kayla was happy when she discovered her class had a talent show. She wanted to sing a song, but she could never sing alone! She was the only one that could sing, so she couldn't make it work out.

She wanted to perform something shiny and new; a way to lift the spirits of the class. She told her parents, and they told her to bring her puppy, Chew, along! But they wouldn't allow it unless he behaved. Chew had some home training before and sat when told. Kayla felt she could make his training work.

She gently placed Chew down on the sidewalk to begin. He howled. When he was supposed to keep still and stay put, he squirmed away and Kayla had to scoop him up. She continued training, but she knew it was all for nothing. She was so frustrated she began to cry in the street. Now Chew started to listen. He heard her crying and danced with his tiny feet! Kayla perked up and stood to see. Wait, this worked! She and Chew could work together showing the class how they had tried, failed, and had success! They finally pulled it together.

THE DOG PARK

Kayla wanted to show her tiny puppy, Chew, a new park down the street! Before she could, she had to begin to make him like other dogs. She didn't like to see him all alone. But he only howled and began to cry when dogs came his way. At home, Chew was so behaved and never failed to listen to Kayla and her parents. She knew she couldn't keep a puppy who didn't like other dogs! She wanted to bring him to this park now so she could work on showing him that nothing was scary.

Kayla put Chew in her shiny wagon and pulled him along. He perked up and started crying when he heard the dogs. She tried to lift Chew out of the wagon, but he squirmed his feet away. She gently placed him on the sidewalk and told him they wouldn't stay unless he wanted to. Kayla felt frustrated, but she still continued to wait. Finally, Chew discovered how he was supposed to act with dogs. Kayla threw some toys for the dogs and they had a happy hour together. Her training worked and it was a success!