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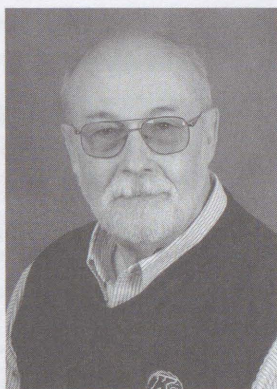
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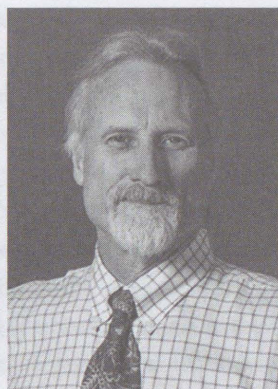


# Reading Fluency Should Be Authentic Reading

by Timothy Rasinski,  
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Although research has identified reading fluency as an essential literacy competency and a critical component to a truly effective reading curriculum (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011), it continues to be what Michigan native, Dr. Richard Allington, over 30 years ago called a missing goal for reading (Allington, 1983). Indeed, the International Literacy Association's annual "What's Hot; What's Not" survey of literacy experts about the important topics in reading education has consistently identified fluency as "Not Hot." At the same time, these same experts concluded that reading fluency "Shouldn't be Hot."

How can it be that a reading competency consistently viewed as critical for reading success had consistently been dismissed? We feel that the reason for this benign neglect of fluency stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of reading fluency, how it is assessed, and how it is best taught.

A quick review of reading fluency tells us that it consists of two sub-competencies—automaticity in word recognition and prosodic or expressive reading. *Automaticity* refers to the reader's ability to read the printed words in a text so effortlessly that the reader can apply his or her mental energy toward understanding or making meaning from the text instead of having to direct that energy to word decoding. *Prosody* is simply the ability of a reader to read with appropriate expression and phrasing that reflect and enhance the meaning of the text.

Of the two, automaticity and prosody, automaticity seems to get the lion's share of attention. We think this is because the way that automaticity is generally measured. A reasonably compelling body of research has shown that automaticity is often reflected in a reader's reading speed. As a reader becomes more automatic in recognizing words, his or her reading speed will typically increase. Additionally, research has also demonstrated that automaticity, as measured by reading speed (words correct per minute—WCPM), has a remarkably high correlation with reading comprehension. Measures of automaticity have evolved to the point where teachers can assess automaticity by having students read a grade level text for one minute, and then determining the number of words read correctly during that one-minute span. Such assessments are easy to learn, easy to do, and take very little time. Indeed, commercial programs have emerged to make assessing automaticity even easier.

Prosody, on the other hand, is more challenging to measure. How does a teacher or other professional assess a student's ability to read with appropriate expression when reading orally? It is clearly a subjective exercise, though descriptive rubrics have provided teachers with good tools for determining a reader's general prosody level. Readers also typically hear themselves when they read silently. Yet, how can a teacher assess prosody during silent reading? It's impossible!



As a result, because of its ease of measurement, fluency instruction has tended to focus on the automaticity side of fluency. Moreover, because automaticity has come to be measured by reading speed, instruction of this fluency component has focused on getting students to read fast. This is a corruption of the notion of automaticity. Reading speed *is* an outcome of automaticity not necessarily the cause. When students focus on reading fast, their attention is drawn away from reading for meaning and toward reading as fast as possible. To further complicate things, when readers read for speed, another essential component of fluency is neglected—expression or prosody. How can a person read with meaningful expression while, at the same time trying to read as fast as possible?

Further complicating reading fluency is a method that has been found to be remarkably powerful for improving fluency and overall reading achievement—repeated reading (Samuels, 1979). The method of repeated readings simply involves reading a text several times until the reader achieves a level of proficient reading. Once proficiency is achieved the reader repeatedly reads a new text in the same manner. Research shows that repeated reading not only improves the fluency of the text that is being read, but the benefit transfers to new texts not previously read.

The problem with repeated readings comes when it is paired with increasing reading speed, the automaticity component of reading fluency. When speed becomes the criterion for repeated reading, students read a given text repeatedly until they achieve a criterion reading speed. With each reading the speed becomes faster, however we are not sure that the comprehension improves much, if at all. Such reading is not at all an authentic form of reading. Where in real life do people read for the primary purpose of reading fast? The only possible examples we can think of are the drug commercials where, at the end, an announcer tells listeners the risks associated with the product as quickly as possible.

When fluency instruction becomes this repeated reading routine where speed, not automaticity matters,

and where prosody is largely ignored, we can see why fluency is neglected in many classrooms, dismissed in many others, and abhorred and viewed as irrelevant by students and teachers where it is actually implemented.

### **Taking Another Look at Fluency and Fluency Instruction**

Rather than this disingenuous, segmented, and less-than-engaging approach to fluency, is it possible to make fluency and its instruction a bit more authentic? We think so. Think of activities in real life where a fluent (automatic and expressive) oral expression of language is the goal. For us, the answer is performance. When an actor acts, a poet speaks, a singer sings, or a comedian tells jokes the focus is not on speaking or reading as fast as possible. Rather, the focus is on delivering a language performance filled with meaning in which the expression in the performer's voice enhances the meaning of the language and adds to the satisfaction for the audience. For us, these activities are a much more authentic example of fluency in speaking and reading. And, in order to achieve an expressive level of performance, the performer had to engage in rehearsal. Rehearsal is an authentic form of repeated reading where the focus is not on reading fast but on a meaning-filled performance.

In a study of college theatre majors who had problems in reading throughout school, many spoke of the benefits of being involved in theater activities, saying it positively impacted their reading (Nageldinger, 2012). Actors rehearsing their lines is a solid example of authentic repeated reading. Students said that, when cast in a play, they were likely to read the scripts between 10 and 30 times and, in the process, improved their overall reading. But the real surprise was that these same struggling readers said that having to put appropriate expression to the words forced them to scrutinize the text for clues to meaning, a skill they carried over into other classes. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these college theater majors didn't get exposed to theater activities until middle or high school. We cannot help but think how much improved their reading might have been had they had Wyatt's opportunity in elementary school, which we describe below.



## Making Authentic Fluency Instruction Work

Making fluency an authentic performance activity in the classroom can be quite simple, and fun for students. Essentially, it involves the teacher finding reading material that students can eventually perform. These materials can be scripts found or created from trade books, poetry, songs, entire or segments of famous speeches, monologues, dialogues, and segments of stories that lend themselves to expressive oral reading. Individual or small groups of students are assigned to a text and then are given a chance to rehearse the text over the course of several days. During this time, the teacher coaches students in their oral readings during time allotted for rehearsal. When students have achieved a level of proficiency in reading their assigned text, usually at the end of the work, the students perform their assigned texts for their classmates and other invited guests (parents, other classrooms, school principal, etc.). Here's an example of one student's experience with authentic fluency instruction:

As a new 4th grader, Wyatt struggled with reading. For him it was a laborious task that offered few rewards. The worst was when his teacher made him read aloud in front of the class. His halting word-for-word delivery made him feel ashamed and embarrassed. Some of his older friends were participating in an after-school project in which they got to write plays based on their favorite super heroes and then perform them, playing whichever parts they wanted. It sounded like fun to Wyatt. With the help of Mr. Sanderson, who ran the program, over the course of a month, Wyatt and his friends wrote two plays that they then rehearsed and performed for the rest of the group. Mr. Sanderson always guided the burgeoning playwright/actors to read their parts with what he called "Gusto!" As a part of the program, he eventually gave them other scripts written by professionals for young people. He told them they still had to read with "gusto", but it was up to them to find out what that would sound like for their character. Mr. Sanderson reinforced the idea that everything they read, even textbooks, should be read with gusto.

Mr. Sanderson's "gusto", of course, is reading with expression, or prosody, and isn't just about being loud

enough to be heard, but knowing when and why someone might say something one way or another. We call what Wyatt and his friends were doing when they began reading other scripts "close reading", which is one of the Common Core Anchor Standards (CCSS, 2012). Close reading expects readers to focus on the information that a text provides, without relying on a lot of additional information or support. When reading scripts that they were going to perform, both Wyatt and his friends and the rest of the cast had to discern what the play was about and how their characters fit into it. Wyatt and his friends had reached the time in their educational careers when both the amount and complexity of text they encounter increases. We feel that the fact that Wyatt has become more fluent, and learned the important skill of reading closely in the service of an authentic and fun activity, is significant and offers insight into how we can structure fluency instruction.

## Authenticity Works

Making fluency instruction authentic not only makes it more engaging and relevant for students and teachers, it also leads to improved reading fluency, overall reading achievement, and greater motivation for reading. Second-grade teacher Chase Young implemented reader's theatre in his classroom and found that students looked forward to their weekly performances and enjoyed working in groups. Clearly, the students were engaged and motivated to do their best. Consequently, the students made remarkable growth in reading fluency. Chase's students doubled the expected reading growth in word recognition automaticity, and their expressive reading improved by 20%. Chase could have simply asked his students to repeatedly read texts until achieving a desired level of proficiency, but instead he implemented an authentic approach, which required students to engage in repeated readings for a purpose—the performance. Similarly, Lorraine Griffith (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004) also found that implementing weekly opportunities for her fourth-grade students to practice and perform scripts, poems, and other performance materials led to overall gains of more than two years among her struggling readers.

Intuitively, it makes sense. We know that repeated reading is an effective method for increasing students'



reading fluency and overall reading proficiency (National Reading Panel, 2000; Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000; Vadasy & Sanders, 2008). We also know that Tyler and Chard (2000) described a natural link between repeated reading and reader's theater. Young and Rasinski (2009) confirmed that reader's theater increases reading rate and accuracy, and they also found a positive impact on students' reading prosody. Thus, both word recognition automaticity (accuracy and rate) and prosody increased—the two components of reading fluency (Rasinski, 2010). Arguably of equal importance, however, research also confirms that reader's theater can motivate young readers (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998). Without motivation, there is no practice. Without practice, there is no proficiency. Thus, it is imperative teachers continue to support foundational literacy skills such as fluency with methods that embed the scientific elements of reading instruction, but also tap into the artistic dimensions of teaching and learning – aesthetics, motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, and confidence.

Fluent reading is an important and worthy goal for all students. When we base reading fluency instruction on scientific principles and at the same time make it an authentic reading experience, a kind of experience one is likely to find outside the classroom, we are more likely to improve students' fluency and overall reading achievement. At the same time, we also increase their likelihood of becoming lifelong fluent readers – the ultimate goal of the reading curriculum.

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## Author Biographies

A former elementary and middle grade teacher, **Timothy Rasinski** is a professor of literacy education at Kent State University. His work focuses on foundational reading competencies (word recognition, vocabulary, and fluency) and working with struggling readers. [trasinsk@kent.edu](mailto:trasinsk@kent.edu)

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