

Improve Reading Fluency with Parent Tutoring

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Abstract

Reading fluency has been identified as one of the necessary components for becoming a strong reader. Instructional techniques designed to improve reading fluency are generally easy to implement. Many parents are eager to assist in the growth of their children's academic skills. This article describes a procedure for improving oral reading fluency that is easy for parents to learn and to carry out. Training parents is relatively simple and can be done by the classroom teacher or other school personnel. Parents in turn are asked to work with their children for 15 minutes a day. Reading material at the child's instructional level is used and recording procedures incorporate goal setting and progress monitoring. A training workshop utilizing modeling and supervised practice was held for 15 families with at-risk children. Case studies describing the successes of two particular children are included.

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Reading fluency has been identified as one of the necessary components for becoming a strong reader. Fluency is based on rate, automaticity of word recognition, intonation, phrasing, and naturalness (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Research has demonstrated that students require frequent opportunities for substantial practice at their instructional reading level in order to achieve an appropriate level of reading fluency. Silent reading does not accomplish this goal. Frequent oral reading opportunities along with regular progress monitoring are needed to guide the child toward improved fluency.

Teachers may not always have the time to allow sufficient practice for each child in the classroom to achieve fluent oral reading. School systems vary in their ability to provide individualized instruction on an as-needed basis. However, parents of every educational and socioeconomic level express a desire to help their children learn. When given appropriate guidance, most parents are willing to provide their children with regular, direct academic assistance (Epstein, 1988). A variety of programs building upon this desire, developed with the needs of parents in mind, and demonstrating positive results with oral reading fluency have been developed (e.g., Duvall, et al., 1992; Erion, 1992; Hook & DuPaul, 1999; Persampieri, et al., 2004). Commonalities among these programs include relatively simple instructional procedures and a requirement for a short instructional period each day. For the most part they have focused on primary grade students. Some studies included students with mild disabilities. Reading treatments were not matched to specific types of disabilities or disability subtypes. However, students provided with interventions designed to improve oral reading fluency were selected on the basis of slow reading rates regardless of category of disability.

The following procedures come from Erion (1992). First, identify reading material at the child's instructional level. Material that is too easy may bore the child while material that is too difficult may be frustrating. In either case learning is less efficient. Select a book, often the child's reading text, and ask the child to read for one minute from each of three different portions; approximately at the beginning, middle, and end of the book. Do not correct the child's reading. Record the number of words read correctly per minute (WCM) and incorrectly per minute (WIM). Hesitations of three seconds or more, substitutions, and omissions are counted as unknown words. Select the median WCM and WIM for the three passages (Shapiro, 1996). If this yields a WIM that is seven or less and the WCM is about 40 to 60 for first and second grade or about 70 to 100 for third to sixth grade, then the material should be considered to be at an instructional level (Fuchs & Deno, 1982). The book meeting these criteria will be used for instruction. An alternative procedure for selecting an instructional level book is to have the child read aloud from the three passages and if the percentage of unknown words is about 5 to 8%, the book is instructional (Gickling & Havertape, 1985). In the event that the book is too difficult, move to an easier text, and determine if it is instructional. Mastery would be 60 or more WCM for first and second grade and 100 or more WCM for third to sixth grade.

It has been the authors' experience that the use of the student's reading book for instruction by the parents has the benefit not only of improving fluency but of reducing frustration in school. This is particularly true when tutoring is done over the weekend with a portion of the material to be presented in school the following week. Some teachers and parents may see this as being not "fair." This is usually reframed easily by explaining

that for learning basic academic skills, fair is not having students start with the same material but doing what is needed to make

sure students are presented with instructional level material which in turn is learned to a mastery level.

TUTORING INSTRUCTIONS

Supplies needed:

reading book
pad of paper, pencil
3 X 5 cards or paper of similar size
15 minutes a day, five days a week

1. Beginning on the page indicated, have your son or daughter read aloud to you for a period of sixty seconds. Timing starts when the first word is read correctly. If he omits a word, substitutes a word, or takes longer than three seconds to say a word, tell him the word. Each time this happens, write the word down on the tablet. If your child makes what you consider to be a careless mistake, point to that word. If he identifies that word correctly, do not count it as an unknown word. Otherwise, it would be considered an incorrect response. Ask your child to stop reading when the sixty seconds have elapsed. Make a slash mark with a pencil after the last word read within sixty seconds. Record the number of words read correctly and incorrectly on the data summary sheet. Show your child the oral reading fluency rate.
2. Write the unknown words on separate cards. Practice the flash cards with your child until recognition is immediate and correct.
3. If mastery has not been obtained; ask your child to read the passage again, following the procedure listed under steps one and two. Show your child the oral reading fluency rates and point out what if any improvement has been made. If mastery has not been obtained following the second reading, then proceed to a third reading of the same material.
4. Beginning with the next complete sentence, repeat the previous procedures. Include any newly identified unknown words with the other flash cards. Practice all of them with your child until recognition is immediate and correct. Whenever you have more than fifteen flash cards, remove the ones that are known best and set them aside. These flash cards can be reviewed with your child on the weekends for a few minutes.
5. Continue this procedure until fifteen minutes have elapsed. Two or three passages should be covered within this period. The amount of progress made is in part determined by how much practice occurs. If you choose to have your child do more work than what is being suggested here, make sure both of you are rested and motivated.
6. Since spaced practice is more effective than massed practice, it is important that the practice occur on at least five different days of each week rather than trying to fit a whole week's practice into one or two nights.

The tutoring technique (see insert titled, "Tutoring Instructions") can be taught directly to parents by the classroom teacher or other school personnel. Although the procedures are fairly simple and written

instructions are provided to parents, the quality of parent training is very important. Have the parent observe the facilitator employing the technique with a child.

QUESTIONS FREQUENTLY ASKED BY PARENTS

Why does my child seem to recognize a word one time and not another?

Inconsistency of performance is characteristic during the process of acquiring new information. It is not something to be overly concerned about. The best way to reduce inconsistency is to continue practicing the skill. Mastery is often defined as correct performance on multiple successive occasions (Ormrod, 2004).

Should I have my child “sound out” words they don’t recognize quickly?

While phonemic awareness and phonics are very important parts of reading instruction, the approach used here relies on quick and correct recognition. The primary reasons for this are keeping the tutoring simple for the parents and avoiding any frustration on the part of the child sometimes associated with “sounding out” words while at the same time trying to improve oral reading.

Can we practice less often but for longer periods?

The best way to review material is to space the tutoring sessions. This can result in twice the learning as that obtained with longer but less frequent instructional sessions (Dempster, 1990).

Why such a strong emphasis on oral reading fluency?

The first reason for stressing oral reading fluency through the use of repeated reading is that it is a simple instructional technique and as such is appropriate for parent tutors to use. Second, oral reading fluency is strongly related to comprehension. With few exceptions, students who read aloud fluently have good comprehension (Hintze, et al., 2004).

What can be done when a student has good oral reading fluency but still has difficulty with comprehension?

About 10% of poor readers have good decoding skills but still have poor comprehension (Shankweiler, et al., 1999). Reading comprehension skills and strategies can be taught through direct and systematic instruction. Contact your child’s classroom teacher. She may already be aware of the problem. The reading teacher, speech/language teacher, and classroom teacher should know instructional techniques that can be employed to improve comprehension.

How much practice does it actually take to learn a word?

It may take 35 repetitions for the average first grader to master a new word. Very bright first graders may only require half this amount of practice while very slow learners may need twice as much. As the student’s reading level increases, the amount of practice needed to obtain mastery often decreases (Hargis, 1988).

Why are they having difficulty learning these simple words?

High imagery words such as “hippopotamus” or “raft” require less practice to learn in isolation than low imagery words such as “whose” and “these” (Hargis, 1988).

What if my child reads too fast?

When a student races through a passage, you will probably hear a lot of careless mistakes or the rapid reading of individual words without proper intonation. A good way to modify this behavior is to set a numeric goal, consistent with good oral fluency, which the student should strive for but not exceed.

What can I do when the stories are too difficult?

When the material used for instruction is at frustration level, there are a variety of procedures you can use to move the story to an instructional level. One is to read and discuss the material with your child prior to his/her reading it aloud. Another is to select those words from the story that you suspect are unknown to him/her. Then make flash cards for these unknown words and present as drill work. If a word’s meaning is not known to the student, define the word and ask the student to use it in a sentence. This familiarity with the words and content of a story will help bring the material up to an instructional level.

What can be done when my child resists practice?

Student resistance may be related to situational factors such as scheduling and distractions. It is best not to practice when the child is tired, such as late in the evening. A routine for practice allows the child and parents to plan for other needed activities. Avoid working in an area where one can hear the television, radio, siblings, etc.

Examine the way in which the parents are communicating the necessity of practice. Are they being clear and direct, or are they making the practice optional? Do they say, “Go get your reading book and bring it to me in the kitchen.”? Or do they say, “Why don’t you want to practice? I’ll give you something if you do your work. It would be very helpful if you were to do this.”

In some situations a reward system may be needed. The goal can be based on improved performance or task compliance. The latter would not be for completing the practice but for starting on time and not complaining. Rewards should be inexpensive. This could include extra TV time, staying up a little later and having a sleep over.

This technique was presented to a group of parents and school staff in the spring of the school year. Parents of 15 at-risk students were trained at an evening session. The size of this group allowed sufficient time for individual contact by the facilitator. Parents first were given background information to support the use of the technique. Then the facilitator demonstrated the technique with a volunteer child. Opportunity was given for questions and discussions. After parents felt they were ready to try the technique, time was given for the parent(s) to work with their own child while the facilitator walked around the room observing the instruction, answering questions, and making supportive suggestions.

Although structured follow-up had not been arranged, about one half of the parents provided unsolicited feedback about the growth of their children's reading skills and improved attitudes toward reading. Two families contacted the authors on multiple occasions. Their cases follow.

Case studies

One mother reported that her child was repeating first grade due to poor reading skills. His Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) (Beaver, 1997) score that was significantly below average in the spring of 2002 (level 3) went up considerably when measured in the fall of 2002 (level 14) after a summer of parent tutoring training. The mother also reported that the child's attitude toward reading had changed completely. Prior to the summer work, he avoided all reading tasks; when starting school in the fall, he was eager to demonstrate his reading skills. Homework was no longer a time for tears, and her child happily brought home an A/B honor roll sticker.

Another family, whose 8-year old child had previously been identified as having characteristics of dyslexia, participated in the parent tutoring. Their son had just completed second grade and had repeated Kindergarten. His parents reported that before the tutoring program began, their son was a struggling reader who avoided all reading opportunities. His DRA score was significantly below grade level. By the end of the summer, he was carrying books of his own choice to soccer practice and other family outings, proudly demonstrating for his parents how well he could read them. He was choosing "chapter books" and announced that he could "read without pictures." Questioning by his parents indicated good comprehension as well. His school performance also increased. This level of improvement continued over the school year, and his DRA score in the spring indicated significant improvements to a score approaching grade level.

Final thoughts

The parent tutoring technique described here has been shown to be an effective solution for children in need of word recognition and fluency practice. It is an opportunity for parents to work with their children and to feel a part of their instruction. The practice time is sufficient for success but not overwhelming to the busy schedules that exist in most households. Teachers are freed to teach the basic skills in the classroom, while oral reading practice takes place at home. Students benefit by seeing the effect of daily practice and by finding enjoyment in reading. Experience has demonstrated that the technique is most successful when there is follow-up and continued contact between the parents and school personnel.

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