Podcast Script:  
What Does Research Have to Say  
About Developing Fluent Readers?

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Hi everyone. I’m Cherilynn Domer and I’m podcasting to you today to explore what research says about reading fluency. My interest in learning what research says about fluency comes from my enrollment in K-5 Classroom Literacy, taught by Dr. Dana Robertson, Associate Professor, at the University of Wyoming and my experience as a second grade teacher. I’ll explore the constructs of fluency, the skills needed to read fluently, and instructional practices that promote fluent reading.

**Why focus on fluency as a classroom teacher?**

Fluency is important to me for several reasons. One reason is that many second grade students are moving from the initial reading stage to the fluent reading stage (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003), and as a second grade teacher, learning about fluency can benefit readers at this stage. A second reason I’m interested in learning more about fluency is that it’s often overlooked in the classroom, or it doesn’t receive the same degree of instructional attention as other areas (Reutzel, 2006). The report from the National Reading Panel (2000) states that fluency is the “most neglected” (p. 5) area of reading instruction, but that it’s an essential element in reading. Another reason I’m interested in fluency is that each year, students enter my classroom lacking the skills to read fluently. As a result, these students are at risk of not reading grade level text, academic failure, and have poor comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000).

I notice that many of these struggling readers in my classroom lack motivation to persevere in the face of academic challenges. One of the biggest academic challenges for struggling readers is developing the skills needed to read fluently and comprehend text. “In other words, fluency is a prerequisite if learners are to succeed at the primary purpose of reading, the construction of meaning from text” (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003, p.4). Citing evidence from several sources, Kuhn (2007) writes:

“In order to be considered a fluent reader, a learner needs to have made the transition from reading that is word by word and monotonous to reading that is smooth and expressive. In other words, rather than expending a large amount of effort decoding the words encountered in texts, students have to develop accurate and automatic word recognition. Furthermore, fluent readers need to be able to transfer prosodic elements, such as appropriate pitch, stress, and phrasing from oral language to written texts” (pp. 101-102).

**How is fluency defined in educational research?**

Many researchers agree that fluency refers to accuracy, rate, and prosody (Kuhn et al., 2006; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski, 2006; Reutzel, 2006). Griffith and Rasinski (2004) add that fluent reading includes “appropriate expression and meaning” (p. 126). Valencia et al., (2010) write “most definitions of oral reading fluency suggest that readers must read quickly and accurately, with attention to proper phrasing and expression, and a central focus on comprehension (p.272).

**What skills do readers need to read fluently?**

Automaticity theory suggests that readers have a “limited amount of attentional resources available for reading” (Kuhn, et. al., 2006, p. 359). In order to utilize attention for comprehending, readers need to be able to decode text with ease and recognize sight words automatically (Kuhn, et al., 2006). In addition to word-level automaticity, fluent readers attend to the prosodic elements of text, such as phrasing, rate, and expression (Valencia et al., 2010; Rasinski et al., 2016).

What about the reader that can decode text accurately, but at a slow rate? I asked this question because I see students in my class that can decode text with ninety-five percent accuracy or higher, but with maximum effort. What does automaticity theory suggest these readers need? Word recognition needs to be automatic in order for a reader to develop fluency (Kuhn et al., 2006). How do readers develop automaticity? “The most effective way for students to develop such automatic word recognition is through extensive exposure to print (Kuhn et al., 2006, p. 359).

**How can teachers help students develop fluency?**

The good news for teachers is that there is a lot of research on how to help students develop fluency. Kuhn and colleagues (Kuhn et al., 2006) conducted research and found that wide-reading and fluency-oriented reading instruction (FORI) are similarly effective approaches for improving fluency for at-risk second grade students. Wide-reading involves scaffolded reading of a wide-range of texts, and FORI involves scaffolded repeated readings. The study suggests that both approaches are effective at improving fluency, but the researchers think that the scaffolding of reading in challenging texts may be the strongest aspect of both approaches. Teachers in both treatments modeled appropriate phrasing and expression, decoding, and provided focused feedback. The study by Kuhn and colleagues (Kuhn et al., 2006) suggests that volume of texts read and time reading in connected text is important for developing fluency.

Reutzel (2006) developed a daily framework teachers can implement to explicitly teach fluency. The fluency development workshop (FDW) is based on the notion that developing fluency requires the same instructional focus as other areas of reading if students are to become fluent readers. Reutzel argues that fluency needs to be a daily part of literacy instruction and be taught systematically and explicitly. The framework is built on gradual release of responsibility with modeling, explicit explanations, guided practice, assessment, including self-assessment, and teaching self-monitoring skills that Reutzel calls *metafluency*. The FDW is based on the expectation that students will be reading orally and anticipating performances, such as Readers Theatre (Reutzel, 2006).

While Reutzel argues that teachers explicitly focus on one skill at a time, Rasinski (2006) argues that students need to be taught all components of fluency simultaneously because it is akin to authentic reading and supports comprehension. Rasinski (2006) argues that a major weakness in fluency instruction and assessment is a lack of focus on comprehension. To engage readers in “good fluency instruction,” Rasinski (2006) finds that the expectation of performance is key to motivation and authentic reading practices; additionally, teachers can engage students with “poetry, song lyrics, chants, rhymes, plays (Readers Theatre), monologues, dialogues, and letters. Such texts work well for oral reading with expression and meaning, not just speed” (p. 705). Research supports repeated readings of connected text and alternative text types (Rasinski, 2006; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Young & Rasinski, 2009; Rasinski et al., 2016) as an effective way to improve fluency. Partner reading has also been found to increase fluency (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004).

One thing I notice about Rasinski’s suggestions is their brevity, which enables teachers to engage students in repeated readings, provides exposure to a range of text types, as well as increases reading volume (Rasinski, 2006). I hope you find something useful in the research presented in this podcast that can benefit you and your students.

Annotated Bibliography

Griffith, L. W., & Rasinski, T. V. (2004). A focus on fluency: How one teacher incorporated fluency with her reading curriculum. The Reading Teacher, 58(2), 126-137. doi:10.1598/RT.58.2.1

Griffith and Rasinski identify the need for explicit fluency instruction in the elementary grades and discuss evidence-based practices that teachers can use to develop fluency, comprehension, and reading motivation for all students. The authors define fluency within the theoretical framework of automaticity, comprehension, and prosody. Evidence from the classroom suggests that Readers’ Theater and partner reading motivated reluctant readers, especially when paired with higher-ability readers. Additionally, data from the study demonstrate that teacher actions that focus on fluency in authentic texts such as plays, poetry, speeches, and other short passages, can lead to tremendous growth for at-risk students.

Kuhn, M. R. (2007). Effective oral reading assessment (or why round robin reading doesn’t cut it). In J. R. Paratore & R. L. McCormack (Eds.), Classroom literacy assessment: Making sense of what students know and do (pp. 101-112). New York: Guilford Press. In this chapter, the author provides an overview of fluency-based reading practices and methods to assess reading fluency. Kuhn defines fluency as a reader’s ability to read accurately and smoothly with appropriate expression. Because fluent word reading allows readers to focus on meaning, assessment is crucial to plan instruction effective instruction that meets the needs of students who are not yet fluent readers. Kuhn discusses assessment methods that help match readers with an appropriate level of text for instruction. The oral reading fluency scales offers teachers a rubric for analyzing prosody. Additionally, measure reading rate and accuracy is important in determining independent, instructional, and frustrational reading level.

Kuhn, M., Schwanenflugel, P., Morris, R., Morrow, L. M., Woo, D. G., Meisinger, E., Stahl, S. (2006). Teaching children to become fluent and automatic readers. Journal of Literacy Research, 38(4), 357-387. doi:10.1207/s15548430jlr3804\_1.

Researchers conducted an experimental study to investigate the efficacy of two, long-term classroom reading fluency interventions. The authors were interested in measuring the effects of the fluency-oriented approach (FORI) and the wide-reading approach on at-risk second graders’ reading development. Both interventions include scaffolded reading of connected text. The main difference between the interventions is that FORI focuses on repeated readings of text and the wide-reading approach focuses on reading a wide variety of text. Results suggest that FORI and the wide-reading approach are equally effective fluency interventions. Researchers found that both interventions correlated to improved fluency and comprehension. Evidence of the experimental design suggests that the results of the study can be generalized to other similar student populations. As a classroom teacher, the results of the study are informative and can be considered evidence-based practices for fluency intervention.

National Reading Panel. (2000). Fluency. In Report of the subgroups: National Reading Panel. (pp. 1-28). Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Development.

A panel of experts analyzed research from experimental studies published in peer-reviewed sources to determine the efficacy of two prominent instructional approaches to fluency. The panel defines fluent reading as effortless and accurate reading at an appropriate rate with expression. Guided oral reading and repeated reading was determined to be an effective way to improve fluency. Findings for the second approach, independent silent reading, were inconclusive, and as such, not recommended.

Rasinski, T. (2006). Reading fluency instruction: Moving beyond accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. The Reading Teacher, 59(7), 704-706. doi:10.1598/RT.59.7.10

Rasinski offers research to support his thesis that reading fluency is more than accuracy and speed, and that authentic reading task and performance are important aspects of real reading. The author agrees with notions from a previously published article by Hudson et al., (2005) that reading fluently encompasses quick and accurate decoding, automaticity, and prosody. However, Rasinski offers additional insights into effective fluency instruction. Firstly, teaching that does not address all the components of fluency simultaneously is not efficient and distorts the purpose of reading for meaning. Rasinski supports repeated reading as a method to improve fluency; however, the goal of repeated readings should be on developing expressive reading for a performance, such as Readers Theatre. Rasinski cites evidence that repeated readings of scripts and poetry with the core focus on expression and performance improves reading comprehension and fluency more than repeated readings focused merely on accuracy and speed.

Rasinski, T. V., Rupley, W. H., Paige, D. D., & Nichols, W. D. (2016). Alternative text types to improve reading fluency for competent to struggling readers. International Journal of Instruction, 9(1), 163-178. doi:10.12973/iji.2016.9113a Evidence supports repeated readings as an effective instructional strategy for teaching fluency; however, as noted by the authors, repeated readings can be monotonous for students. The authors state that fluent readers need to read with speed, accuracy, automaticity, and expression. As students become fluent readers, cognitive energy is utilized for comprehension. Students who do not develop fluency face a “significant impediment” to comprehension. Studies indicate that students who struggle to perform well on standardized reading test generally have difficulty in one ore more areas of fluency; therefore, fluency instruction is crucial for the success of these lower-performing students. Repeated readings of rhyming poetry is suggested by the authors as an engaging way to teach phonics, decoding, as well as develop expressive reading. The paper provides a three-step instructional strategy to teach word families in isolation and in the context of rhyming poems.

Reutzel, D. R. (2006). “Hey, teacher, when you say ‘fluency,’ what do you mean?” Developing fluency in elementary classrooms. In T. Rasinski et al. (Eds.), Fluency instruction: Research-based best practices (pp. 62-85). New York: Guilford Press.

This chapter explores the nature of effective instructional practices that develop fluency. While many elementary teachers are aware of fluency, the author suggests that explicit fluency instruction is needed in order to develop fluent readers. Observations in elementary classrooms demonstrate read alouds are commonplace, but not sufficient to support fluency development. Understanding the components of fluency is the springboard for explicit and effective instruction and the Fluency Development Workshop (FDW). Teachers need to systematically and explicitly teach and monitor student progress concerning rate, accuracy, and prosody. One goal of the FDW is that students will develop metafluency to monitor and adjust fluency skills to support comprehension. Several instructional strategies should be included in the fluency workshop. The daily workshop should include explicit explanations, modeling, descriptions, and guided practice utilizing oral repeated readings with target feedback across a range of texts.

Valencia, S. W., Smith, A. T., Reece, A. M., Li, M., Wixson, K. K., & Newman, H. (2010). Oral reading fluency assessment: Issues of construct, criterion, and consequential validity. Reading Research Quarterly, 45(3), 270-291. doi:10.1598/RRQ.45.3.1

This study investigates the problems associated with using a single indicator of fluency, words correct per minute (wcpm), as a measure of reading proficiency in elementary-age students. Evidence from the study supports the idea that wcpm is not a valid measure of reading fluency, rather a measure of reading rate. Moreover, the widespread use of assessments that define proficiency as wcpm, such as DIBLES, result in significant false negatives and false positives. The authors argue that a more comprehensive assessment of fluency and comprehension is warranted because invalid results lead to students receiving interventions that do not need them and prevent students from receiving interventions they need to be successful. Assessments used by the authors included rate, accuracy, prosody, and comprehension. When compared to the wcpm construct to determine reading readiness, the authors’ assessments were more valid in identifying students who needed interventions and slow readers who had good comprehension.

Young, C., & Rasinski, T. (2009). Implementing readers’ theatre as an approach to classroom fluency instruction. The Reading Teacher, 63(1), 4-13.

This article discusses an action research project conducted at a Title 1 school. Twenty-nine second grade students participated in the study. Reading proficiency ranged form beginning of kindergarten through third grade. Of the 29 students, nine were ELL’s. The article describes how Readers Theatre was integrated into daily classroom instruction. On Monday, the teacher modeled fluent reading and students chose their scripts. Students chose parts and read the script for homework on Tuesday. Students participated in mixed-ability choral partner reading on Wednesday, where the more proficient reader acts as a coach or model. The last two days of the week allowed for additional rehearsals and performances. Significant gains in fluency were observed in the class involved in the Readers Theatre when compared to the data from the previous class. Moreover, students were motivated to read and developed a positive attitude toward reading.