Podcast Transcript

Today I’m discussing what the research says about struggling readers who appear to read fluently but cannot comprehend what they are reading. This idea came to me as it seems that I have had a few students year after year that come to my class appearing to show great fluency by reading words accurately and reading at a good rate. However, when it came time to discuss the text, these students showed disconnect as they couldn’t really explain what was happening in the story. When I would ask a question, I noticed that they might go back and pick a sentence from the text and read it back to me hoping that it would be the right answer. When I asked them to read a sentence or two and then close the book, they couldn’t tell me what they just read. So, I noticed a pattern that these students were typically the first to raise their hands when it came time to read, but also the last to raise their hands when it came time to answer questions.

In helping understand the connection between fluency and comprehension, I had to find out more about what fluency meant. Now this was not exactly clear for many researchers, as I found there to be several different definitions throughout my research. Kuhn & Stahl (2003) mention that fluency is based on three constructs. Most common in fluency is quick and accurate word recognition. Prosody is also another an important factor especially when it comes to oral reading, but only some include comprehension within the definition. For example, Rasinski (2004) referred to reading fluency as the reader’s ability to develop control over surface-level text processing, so that he or she can focus on understanding the deeper levels of meaning embedded in the text. This shows how important fluency is for our students to be able to read and understand the text. There is much debate about the role comprehension plays in fluency but I think that Stecker, Roser and Martinez said it best in their review of fluency research when they couldn’t confirm comprehension being either an outgrowth or a contributor, but they did say that “fluency has been shown to have a ‘reciprocal relationship’ with comprehension with each fostering each other” (Pikulski & Chard, 2005, p.306).

I’m not so sure that teachers consider the connection or importance that fluency has on comprehension. I know, I didn’t. When thinking about fluency, most teachers look at speed and accuracy because that is what a running record focuses on. They do throw in a few questions for comprehension but I don’t think that is the intent of a running record. In my research I found an article titled “She’s my best reader; she just can’t comprehend” where graduates students were studying this same topic and they found that many schools had an overemphasis on fluency in terms of rate and accuracy without the balance of comprehension.

So what causes this disconnect for our students to be good readers, but lack comprehension skills? There are many theories based on research, one of them being the automaticity theory that was led by LaBerge and Samuels (1974). Understanding that reading is composed of several elements that include decoding and comprehension, researchers like Samuels, LaBerge, Stanovich, and others believe that while the brain is working on decoding a word, there is little attention or resources the brain allows for comprehension. So, until word recognition becomes more automatic, then less cognitive resources are available to help construct meaning.

Another theory that needs to be considered is prosody. Prosody refers to the rise and fall patterns in speech and includes phrasing, pause structures and stress added when reading a sentence or speaking.   
There was a study done in 2006 by some graduate students at the University of Georgia and found that children that had more pause structures, larger pitch rises and falls at the ends of sentences and yes and no questions, tended to demonstrate greater reading comprehension. It’s been theorized that reading prosody may help comprehension because students that read with prosody can segment text into major syntactic and semantic elements. Prosodic reading entails many aspects that include pauses, phrasing, intonation and stress but may be a link between fluency and comprehension. In considering intonation, students must read and assign roles to the words in the sentence. Students hear this intonation in speech when a teacher reads aloud or when they are listening to a recorded story as it’s placed there for them making it easier to understand. It makes understanding more difficult when students have to provide the cues themselves while they read. There have not been many studies on this so the argument is weak.

Another area within prosody is punctuation. This is a visual cue that lets the reader know when to pause. Punctuation has a strong impact on comprehension because if students omit it, the sentence can take on a whole new meaning. The example I like to give my students is “Let’s eat grandma!” Clearly without giving pause and phrasing for the first part of the sentence, then we think we are having grandma for dinner. So, helping students understand the difference in “Let’s eat, Grandma!” as the difference between inviting her rather than enjoying her as a meal extends the importance of comprehension within fluency. However, as with are crazy English language, there is always an exception to the rule and not all commas have the same pauses, and even questions can be read with different rise and falls in pitch, so again, the argument still needs more research.

Some other areas that might provide a gap in fluency and comprehension may be due to teacher intervention. In the article “Teaching Children to Become Fluent Automatic Readers” they claim that reading in the classroom is not enough to develop fluent and automatic reading. Gambrell (1984) found that children read connected text for less than 9 minutes per day on average and struggling readers as little as 1 -2 minutes. I find that my struggling readers definitely spend less time with the text as they are out of my classroom working on a particular skill. I think that without the increase of reading text for longer periods of time, they will not make the growth that they need as they are not practicing the decoding, prosody and comprehension skills they need. Rasinski also mentions that when students have poor comprehension, they tend to lack motivation as they feel a personal sense of failure.

So how do we close the gap for these readers to help build their comprehension? According to research, there are many approaches to teaching fluency that doesn’t only focus on speed and accuracy. In one article the FORI approach allowed for many repeated readings to happen throughout the week in a variety of ways such as a read aloud, echo reading, choral reading along with some extension activities. The wide- reading approach was similar but varied with reading three texts throughout the week. This approach is similar to the reading curriculum that I use now in my classroom. The read aloud definitely gives students a model to hear what fluent reading sounds like. This also is a time to discuss the text and bring in more comprehension with discussion. I often model my thinking to show students how to stop and question what the text is saying. This also helps set expectations when they work toward independence. Choral reading is another way to practice the read with the teacher and others to help build prosody.

In another article, Griffith & Rasinski (2004) share how reader’s theater helped build fluency and comprehension as they found that students that learn to read in an expressive and meaningful manner also learn to construct meaning from the text. The ultimate goal is for students to think critically about the text as they read so they can analyze it enough to be able to respond to questions about it and give their own judgements. Reader’s theater allows for students to practice the expression, phrasing, and prosody that I mentioned before that helps tend to comprehension. The students don’t necessarily have to act, but just practice how it sounds as it would be performed. This teacher found that her students made significant gains in their reading comprehension.

In considering my own approach, I think that reader’s theater is a great way to help practice prosody that I believe is a link between fluency and comprehension. I also believe that students need repeated practice to help develop their fluency toward automaticity. I have been working with my students in reading passages together as well as having them record themselves on their tablets. I think this helps them hear themselves read and compare it to what I model for them. I also include some questions to assess their comprehension. My hope is they that they begin to hear themselves make gains in their intonation, stress and phrasing that will lend to better understanding of the text. This self-assessment helps them determine their weaknesses and set goals for their own fluency and comprehension. It’s a work in progress but I am anxious to see if this may be something that can help my struggling readers.

References

Appelgate, M.D., Appelgate, A. J., and Modla, V. B. (2009). “She’s my best reader; she just

can’t comprehend”: Studying the relationship between fluency and comprehension. *The Reading Teacher, 62*(6), 512-521. doi:1598/RT.62.6.5

This article reflects a study done by graduate students looking at higher level readers based on the teacher’s perception and comparing it to their comprehension. The study found that many teachers determine fluency based on speed and accuracy without the consideration of comprehension. The article discusses arguments that fluency is a predecessor to comprehension, while others believe that it is an “outcome” of comprehension. They do not rule either of these ideas out as they conclude more research is needed.

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.

This article is based on the classroom practice of an elementary school teacher that

improved her fluency instruction with the use of Reader’s Theater, partner reading and

timed reading.. Making fluency an integral part of her instruction gave her students

opportunities to hear fluent, expressive and meaningful reading. The results of her fluency shift produced greater results in student comprehension as well as overall engagement in students.

Kuhn, M. R. et al. (2006). Teaching children to become fluent and automatic readers. *Journal of*

*Literacy Research, 38*(4), 357-387.

This research study focused on two instructional approaches for reading fluency comparing them to understand if one was a better instructional approach than the other. The first approach, FORI involved scaffolded, repeated reading over the course of the week. The second, the wide-reading, also involved scaffolded instruction but included three different texts with less repetition. The authors concluded that there was not much difference in the approaches as they both were effective.

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.  
This chapter from this book discusses methods of effective fluency instruction. Kuhn describes the four principles of developing fluent reading as well as noting ineffective instruction. Kuhn also discusses the use of assessments in fluency while giving thought to the readers that need fluency assessment. This article reflects the importance of teachers considering fluency in their literacy curriculum by having a clear sense of what should be included and how it is assessed.

Miller, J., & Schwanenflugel, P. J. (2006). Prosody of syntactically complex sentences in the oral

reading of young children. *Journal of educational psychology*, *98*(4), 839.

This article reflects a study to determine the degree of which prosody of complex sentences varied as a function of reading speed and accuracy, as well as understanding the role reading prosody has in increasing reading comprehension. The study concludes that children with quick and accurate oral reading that included short pause structures and larger pitch rise and falls within questions and sentences, demonstrated greater reading comprehension. The study also considered the theories of comprehension based on the automaticity theory and the contribution of prosody.

Pikulski, J. J., & Chard, D. J.. (2005). Fluency: Bridge between Decoding and Reading

Comprehension. *The Reading Teacher*, *58*(6), 510–519. Retrieved from

http://www.jstor.org/stable/20205516

This article takes an in-depth look at the history of fluency instruction by understanding the foundations that build effective instruction based on Ehri’s theory. Understanding that word identification and decoding are key, the author explains how using an effective model of fluency instruction can lead to building comprehension. The authors maintain that the use of repeated and wide reading demonstrates effective instruction. They also agree that comprehension must be considered with fluency instruction.

Rasinski, T. (2006). Reading fluency instruction: Moving beyond accuracy, automaticity, and

prosody. *The Reading Teacher, 59*(7), 704-706.  
This article discusses the importance of fluency instruction by moving beyond the focus of speed and accuracy to understand how to lead to better comprehension. Rasinski does a quick examination of the errors found within struggling readers and suggests that fluency instruction not be separate from other components that help support it like comprehension. With the use of good instruction using reader’s theater and repeated readings, students and teachers begin to focus less on the speed and more on the comprehension.