

**In Step With Demanding Professional Expectations:
Let Oral Reading Fluency Help**
by Deborah R. Glaser, Ed.D.

Isn't it gratifying to be engaged in reading education during this time of expanding research-supported practice? Now, more than during any other period before, educators have greater knowledge, purposeful tools, and deeper understanding of how to teach reading so that more at-risk students can successfully learn to read! The reader's reply may be, "Yes, it's an exciting time to be in education, BUT it is also demanding. I am barely keeping up with the after-school and weekend workshops and clinics. The articles about teaching reading from my principal and reading specialist keep piling up. I am constantly given extra tasks to complete, forms to fill out, new instructional materials and assessments with which I am expected to develop expertise, and my classroom is continually under observation-arrest by visiting teachers and administrators!" These are the professional demands of today's teachers urging educators to be the strongest and most capable they can be. If any of these sentiments sound familiar, chances are that it is time to take several deep breaths, go to a funny movie with a friend and then proceed to simplify instructional routines by focusing on practical reading assessments and teaching processes that get results with minimal effort and planning. This article outlines a cyclical process that clarifies and simplifies effective reading instruction with at-risk students.

Oral Reading Fluency – A Powerful Predictor and Useful Monitor

Oral Reading Fluency has withstood the rigors of decades of research to become a trusted assessment of students' current and future reading abilities (Shinn, 2001). *AIMSweb* provides leveled reading passages (R-CBM) to assess students' oral reading fluency. The comprehensive nature of this valuable assessment extends beyond its obvious function as an assessment of reading ability to inform a full circle of efficient practice aimed at improving the struggling student's reading ability. Indeed, for assessment to be truly valuable, educators must use the results to group students, plan appropriate instruction, continually monitor growth, and adapt instruction to obtain positive reading gains. This responsive process initiates with *assessment, and analysis*, transitions into *planning and instruction*, and is then followed by *progress monitoring*. Progress monitoring results continue to inform *planning and instruction* in a repetitive cycle of *teach and monitor* until students reach the predetermined benchmark levels of oral reading fluency. Each of the steps in this cyclical process is outlined below in specific step-by-step detail with instructional activities included.

Assessment and Analysis

Step One: Assess Oral Reading Fluency. Our brains are wired to combine and apply *four distinct but separate processes* during reading (Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989, Adams, 1994; Berninger & Richards, 2002): **phonological** (phoneme awareness), **orthographic** (decoding skills), **semantic** (vocabulary), and **context** (background knowledge). This processing model provides us with a reference for both assessing and planning instruction. Using this model as a guide, we can isolate which process or combination of processes are contributing to reading difficulties and teach those

processes to establish *fluent and automatic skills*. A simple one-minute assessment of a student's words read per minute provides a lot of information for teachers. There is a strong correlation between a student's reading fluency as measured by words read per minute and reading comprehension (Shinn, Shinn, Hamilton & Clark, 2001). Through analyzing the types of errors made by students during oral reading, we can also isolate other processing areas that may be contributing to the difficulty and plan appropriate and relevant instruction to target those weaknesses.

Perform an analysis of students' Oral Reading Fluency. Look at the student's errors and ask the following questions:

1. **Phonological:** Is there evidence of poor phonological awareness? Substitution, omission, confusion, or sequence of sounds (e.g., a~~m~~inal for animal, wet for went), or similarly pronounced words confused (participate for precipitate). Look at a writing sample for evidence of these same phonemic errors in the student's spelling. Phonemic awareness can be assumed to be a contributor to reading difficulties (Moats, 1999; Moats, 2003) and should be included in instruction as a segmentation task along with decoding.
2. **Orthographic:** Are there decoding errors? Were there decodable words that the student missed? What were the specific decoding errors? Example: Confusion of short vowel sounds, weak vowel variant decoding, difficulty with multisyllable words.
3. **Comprehension – Semantic and context.** What was the student's performance on the comprehension portion of the assessment? The Maze? Is the student able to retell accurately what he read? Did he use any of the vocabulary from the reading in the discussion? Is the student able to connect any of the information in the text to personal experience?

Once these questions have been answered, teachers can plan relevant instruction to address the determined weaknesses. Additional assessment may be needed to further clarify students' needs.

Planning and Instruction

This section outlines a few instructional activities that can be incorporated into lesson planning after student weaknesses have been identified. Each of the four processing systems, phonological; decoding; vocabulary; comprehension; and additionally, fluency training are included. These systems are distinct, yet reciprocal in their relationship. Improving one will improve another. A reading teacher's goal is for students to have *fluent and automatic access to these systems* therefore instruction will focus on building fluent responses.

Phonological

Phoneme Awareness

Phoneme awareness, a sub-skill of phonological awareness, is an awareness of separate speech sounds within oral language. The ability to isolate and manipulate speech sounds in words is directly related to the ability to decode.

Phoneme Awareness Activities K-3:

★**Picture Sorts:** Provide an assortment of pictures. Name the pictures with the students. Instruct students to sort the pictures in one of the following ways:

- 1) Provide a target sound, “Find a picture that starts the same as /s/.”
- 2) Provide a target picture, “Find a picture that starts the same as sun.”
- 3) Provide two key pictures, “Find pictures that start the same as these two pictures.”
Make two groups. Organize pictures under the picture with the same first sound.
- 4) Increase the number of key sound groups to three.
- 5) Provide *letters* that represent the target sound(s). Teach letter sounds. Instruct students to group pictures under the letters that show initial picture sounds.

★**Articulation features:** There are sounds in English that are difficult for non-English speakers to isolate and identify. For example, Spanish speakers have a difficult time reproducing /ch/. These students, and all young students, benefit from instruction that includes investigation of the articulatory features of sounds. Use mirrors to observe what the lips, tongue, and teeth do while producing the sound. Assist students to describe how the sounds are made. Include whether the sounds are voiced or unvoiced.

Phoneme - Auditory Blending

Auditory blending is hearing a word separated into its phonemes and then blending the sounds to say the word.

★**Kid Sounds:** Bring two or three students to the front of the room (number of students needs to correspond to the number of sounds in the word to be segmented). Whisper the sounds of a word (one sound per child) in their ears. When you touch a student’s head (touching left to right), they say their sound. The class blends the sounds to make the secret word. Whisper new consonant sounds and use the same vowel, or change the vowel to continue the practice.

★**Robot Talk:** (Sometimes called Secret Code) Say a word *stretched out* with every phoneme separated by about a second of time. The students then repeat the word back to you as a whole unit.

★**I’m Thinking:** Create riddles with a focus on students’ experiences.

“I’m thinking of something we eat every day, /l/ /u/ /n/ /ch/.”

Use *I’m Thinking* to practice other phoneme awareness skills.

“I’m thinking of something good to eat. It starts with /p/.” (pizza, pickles, pineapple)

“I’m thinking of something in the room that ends with /r/. It is in your desk.” (eraser, marker, sticker)

“I’m thinking of someone’s name that has the /o/ sound in it.” (Tom)

Phoneme – Complete Segmentation

Phoneme segmentation is hearing a word and separating all the sounds in that word.

★**Eat your Sounds:** Use small edibles to segment sounds, instruct students to “Eat the /m/,” etc.

★**Head-Waist-Toes:** Say a three sound word. Students stand and touch head (say first sound), waist (say second sound), and toes (say final sound).

★**Touch and Say:** Students use paper squares, tiles, or cubes as sound markers to count out the sounds in words. Students line up sound markers left to right and pull one down for every sound in a word, saying the sounds as they touch the markers.

★**Step and Say:** Students stand and, while segmenting a given word, take one step for each sound in a word. Students can be told that they are snails or turtles, which walk and talk very slowly saying each sound in a word when they talk.

Phoneme Awareness Activities 3rd Grade and Up:

These activities are designed for small groups and individuals in remedial groups. They may also have a place with whole group instruction.

★**Connect phonemes with spelling:**

- Dictate a word from spelling or reading list. “*build.*”
- Students repeat the word, “*build.*”
- Teacher listens to students say the sounds in the word. “/b/ /i/ /l/ /d/.” Teacher models segmentation for students if there are errors. Students segment the word after teacher models correct segmentation.
- Students segment the word orally and draw a line on their paper for each sound as they say the sounds. /b/ /i/ /l/ /d/
- Students then write the letters on the lines for each sound as they say the sounds.
- Provide visual example of the word on the board for students to immediately correct their work.
- Continue with other words in the list.

Multiple syllable words will require that a line be drawn for each syllable and then the phonemes segmented and spelled for each syllable.

Orthographic Decoding

Explicit systematic phonics instruction is best accomplished with a reading program that applies a well-designed skills sequence and supplies decodable and controlled text for students to practice the decoding skills they learn (Foorman, et al, 1998). Using fluency assessment analysis and reading program assessments, isolate the sound letter combinations with which students are not yet fluent and focus instruction on these areas using any of the activities below. These activities are meant to supplement reading program lessons.

★**Letter Flip:** Create three stacks of letters on cards – consonants, vowels, consonants. Decode and blend the sounds, change one of the sounds, decode and blend again. Repeat the process several times to provide decoding practice. Move toward fluent and instant decoding of the words.

★**Word Chains:** Students use moveable magnetic or other letter tiles to spell words dictated by the teacher. It is important for the letter tiles to represent one sound/grapheme. For example, the digraph /sh/ should be written on one tile not as separate tiles S and H. A *word chain* uses words that differ from each other by one sound. This chain would be appropriate for students who are having difficulty discriminating between /i/ and /e/: big, beg, bet, set, sit, pit, pet.

★**Word Sorts:** Choose words that represent the phonic elements that students have difficulty decoding. Provide these words on slips of paper, or dictate the words and instruct students to write the words on slips of paper. Practice reading the words then direct students to group the words according to your rules for sound and spelling. “Find all words that have the /o/ sound. Read them. Find all words that have /e/ spelled -ea-.” Always instruct students to read the words after they complete their sort.

Semantic Vocabulary and Comprehension

Vocabulary and comprehension go hand-in-hand. Both skills rely on the presence of oral language; each skill supports the development of the other. Therefore, vocabulary instruction can be combined with comprehension instruction. Keep these research outcomes in mind as you plan ***vocabulary instruction*** for all grade levels (Graves, 2004):

1. Provide students with **frequent, extensive, and varied** experiences with language.
2. Teach individual words.
3. Teach students strategies for learning words independently.
4. Foster word consciousness.

Important: Multiple exposures to vocabulary words in a variety of contexts is necessary for students to learn the words (Coyne, Simmons & Kame’enui, 2004). Plan on revisiting any words chosen for instruction at least **six** times over the course of a week. Instruct students to 1) use the words to discuss the subject content; 2) relate a personal experience; 3) retell a part of a story or text; 4) write sentences; 5) use in a word sort; 6) and, use in a semantic web.

Weave these methods for increasing vocabulary and oral language into daily routines:

- ***Read orally to students.*** Students learn a percentage of words from exposure.
- ***Lead and encourage discussions*** using vocabulary from the readings. Say to students, “Tell me about the boy’s decision and use the word ‘*difficult*’.”
- ***Include expository text choices*** for oral reading. This is especially important in schools with high numbers of low SES students who have not had interaction with the wider world and the resulting opportunities to develop the associated vocabularies and background knowledge.
- Offer increasing ***opportunities for students to read on their own*** as their reading skills increase. Remember, monitored oral reading is preferred to silent un-monitored reading for students who are still mastering basic reading skills and are not yet benchmark on their Oral Reading Fluency measures

- Provide opportunities for students to *listen to books on tape*. Follow up with *teacher-led discussion about the content*, use vocabulary from the story, and focus on predefined goals of learning about the content (vocabulary and comprehension).

Context Comprehension

In addition to the oral language activities above, teacher directed interactive language increases student talk (Beck & McKowen, 1997). Use prompts instead of recall questions to take students to higher and more complex levels of comprehension. Here are some examples of *prompts*. Write them on a bookmark kept in the text the students and teacher are reading for quick access and a reminder to prompt not question.

- Tell me more.
- What is the author telling us here?
- How do you know?
- What does the author want us to learn from this?
- Tell us about “Joe’s” answer and use your own words.

Fluency Training

Students who have not met benchmark levels of performance on AIMSweb Oral Reading Measures need explicit purposeful instruction in the above components due to the reciprocal nature of these skills. At the same time, these students require overt attention to increasing fluency as measured in words read per minute. One of the ways teachers can assist students to improve reading fluency is through *repeated readings*. The following repeated reading lesson should be used at least three times per week. It is a one-on-one format that has been proven to be effective even with trained paraeducators (Glaser, 2002). Use reading material at an instructional level for young students grades 1-3. Use challenging reading levels for intermediate and older students because of the urgency to accelerate performance (Hasbrouck, 2003).

Repeated Readings - Step-by-Step Process

The repeated reading process outlined in this text is accomplished one-on-one. The student reads the same material three times with error correction from the teacher between readings. Here is an outline of the process. Step-by-step directions follow.

- Begin with a one-minute cold read of material (no practice prior to reading).
- Record number of words read correctly and correct student errors with student.
- Time a second read of the same material. Encourage student to read further.
- Record number of words read correctly and once again correct student’s errors with the student.
- Time a third read.
- Record number of words read correctly and if needed correct errors with student.

Step-by-Step Directions

Instruct the student: “Please read this passage for your fluency training today. Begin reading here (point) and read until I tell you to stop. If you come to a word you don’t

know, I will tell you the word.” Time him for one minute and note the number of words he reads. Subtract the errors for a total of words correct per minute (WCPM).

1. Chart the WCPM on a data chart. Show the student how to graph his own performance.
2. Review the errors with the student. Show and tell him the words you helped him with, and words he omitted or substituted.
3. Instruct the student to read the passage again following the same procedure outlined in 1 through 3.
4. Do this for a total of three times. Instruct the student to graph his performance after each reading. Work with the student to set goals between his readings, “How many words can you read next time? Can you beat your time?”

Reading Errors

The following guidelines explain what to count as a reading error during repeated readings. Error counting is similar to the AIMSweb Oral Reading Fluency (R-CBM) assessment instructions.

- **Unknown word:** The student hesitates or attempts to read a word but does not produce the correct word in 3 seconds. Provide the correct word for the student and mark it as an error on your sheet.
- **Substitution:** The student misreads a word, substituting a different word for the actual word in the text.
- **Omission:** The student leaves a word out while reading.

Do not count as errors:

- Rereading words or phrases.
- Self corrections made within 3 seconds.

Progress Monitoring – Informed Instruction

Once *analysis, planning, and instruction* are in place, *progress monitoring* of student growth becomes a critical piece of the instruction plan. Teachers need to know if their instruction is working! They need timely and frequent feedback on the effectiveness of their instruction through the growth of their students’ reading skills because every day counts when striving to ‘catch up.’ Progress monitoring informs teachers’ on-going decisions about instruction content, frequency, and size of instructional group. Informed instruction means that lesson content is adapted to better meet the needs of students.

Depending on the age of the student, there are several progress monitoring measures to choose from. AIMSweb offers these benchmark and progress monitoring Early Literacy measures: letter naming, letter sound, phoneme segmentation, and nonsense word reading as. Oral Reading Fluency (R-CBM) begins mid first grade and is an excellent progress monitor for any age.

Whichever progress monitoring measure is being used, plan on using it at least once every two weeks. It can be used to check progress every week if desired and some teachers use it once a month for feedback. Fluency measures are sensitive to the smallest increments of change, so if students are producing more sound segments or reading more words per minute then teachers know that instruction can continue as planned. However, if students are not making progress or number of responses per minute is decreasing, then the instructional process need to be examined and changed.

Investigate the following options one at a time to intervene with instructional changes if student Progress Monitoring scores are stagnant or decreasing. Make one change, progress monitor after two weeks, and if there is still no positive growth, move to another alternative change.

1. Change instruction: Are the activities, the instructional level, and process providing the right amount at the right level? Is the instruction systematic and explicit?
2. Change group composition: Are there issues with discrepant performance levels that do not allow students to be instructed with appropriate level materials? Are there too many students in the group?
3. Change materials: Are the materials and/or program used for instruction appropriate?
4. Change amount of instructional time: Does the student need more time and practice with the material to make gains?

Conclusion

Every teacher encounters professional demands for excellence from external administration, parental, and government stakeholders. The teaching profession demands that all teachers be informed regularly about current effective and proven practice, so that more students gain higher levels of reading ability. This article presented guidelines for implementing a cyclical instructional process that has been proven to be effective when used with reading programs based on scientific based research, on-going professional development that is supported at the classroom level, and in a collaborative environment. This process and accompanying teaching activities provide an overview of one piece of an effective program. Implementation requires support through professional development that takes this cyclical instructional process to deeper levels of understanding with practice over time. The world belongs to children who read. Reading is a gift that knowledgeable teachers, holding themselves to high levels of professional expectation, can bestow.

If the reader is interested in more information about planning instruction, implementing Benchmark and Progress Monitoring, or training opportunities, please contact the author: Deborah Glaser, Ed.D. is an educational consultant, teacher trainer, and conference presenter. She can be contacted at dglaser@cablone.net.

Dr. Glaser brings personal knowledge and experience from 28 years as special education instructor, classroom teacher, and administrator to her work with teachers and schools. She has planned and implemented remedial programs for individuals with dyslexia and established training and consultation programs to support the success of state reading initiatives and Reading First. She was advisor to Idaho's Legislative Reading Committee and principal author of Idaho's Reading Initiative, 1999. Deborah is currently a National Trainer of Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (Louisa Moats, LETRS). She consults regularly with schools and districts, assisting with the implementation of scientifically based reading programs and strengthening practitioners' collaborative efforts. Dr. Glaser is author of **ParaReading: A Training Guide for Tutors**.

REFERENCES

- Adams, M.J. (1990, 1994). *Beginning to read*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Beck, I.L. & McKowen, M.G. (1997). *Questioning the author: An approach for enhancing student engagement with text*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Berninger, V.W. & Richards, T.L. (2002). *Brain literacy for educators and psychologists*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Coyne, M.D., Simmons, D.C. & Kame'enui, E.J. (2004). Vocabulary instruction for young children at risk of experiencing reading difficulties. In *Vocabulary instruction: research to practice*, eds. Bauman, J.F. & Kame'enui, E.J. NY, NY: Guilford Press.
- Foorman, B.R., Francis, D.J., Fletcher, J.M., Schatschneider, C., & Mehta, P. (1998). The role of instruction in learning to read: Preventing reading failure in at-risk children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(1), 37-55.
- Glaser, D.R. (2002). *High school tutors: Their impact on elementary students' reading fluency through implementing a research based instruction model*. Doctoral Dissertation: Boise State University.
- Graves, M.F., 2005. *Teaching prefixes: As good as it gets?* In *Vocabulary instruction: research to practice*, eds. Bauman, J.F. & Kame'enui, E.J. NY, NY: Guilford Press.
- Hasbrouck, J.E. (2003). *Increasing the fluency rates of adolescents*. Presentation Bridges to Learning Conference, Coeur d'Alene, ID.
- Moats, L.C. (1999). *Teaching reading is rocket science: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do*. Washington DC: American Federation of Teachers.
- Moats, L.C. (2003). *Language essentials for teachers of reading and spelling*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West Educational Services.
- Seidenberg, M.S., & McClelland, J.L. (1989). A distributed, developmental model of word recognition and naming. *Psychological Review*, 96, 523-568.
- Shinn, M.R. (2001). Best practices in curriculum-based measurement. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology IV*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Shinn, M.R., Shinn, M.M., Hamilton, C. & Clark, B. (2001). Using curriculum-based measurement in general education classrooms to promote reading success. To appear in M.R. Shinn, G. Stoner, and H.M. Walker, *Interventions for achievement and behavior problems II: Preventive and remedial approaches*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.