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An Update to the National Reading Panel Report: What We Know About Fluency in 2020

Twenty years ago, the Report of the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) put fluency front and center in discussions about reading instruction and assessment for the subsequent two decades. The NRP introduced the topic of fluency with this definition, and included a bit of finger wagging: “Fluency, the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression, has been described as the ‘most neglected’ reading skill (Allington, 1983) and with good reason.” (NRP, p. 3-5). Most of what the NRP concluded about reading fluency remains true today. While there has been substantial research conducted in the past 20 years about many aspects of fluency, there have not been major findings from those studies that either contradict the original report, or for that matter, substantially address some of the areas where the NRP noted that more research was needed. The most notable updates have to do with today’s more complex understanding of fluency and much more attention being paid to widely used fluency-based assessments.

Defining Reading Fluency

While the essence of the NRP definition of fluency as reading text “quickly, accurately, and with proper expression” still informs our shared understanding of fluency, this definition is rarely cited verbatim in current writings. One reason may be that the NRP definition put rate--reading “quickly”-- as the first, and thus implied most important, aspect of fluency. More current definitions list accuracy first, to emphasize that reading fluently is not the same as reading fast, and that given the essential role of fluency is to support comprehension, accuracy should be seen as “first, foremost, and forever the foundation of fluency” (Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2019, p. 12).

Our understandings of fluency continue to evolve as researchers conceptualize fluency as a deeply complex, and multi-faceted construct (Hudson et al., 2009) necessary but never sufficient for comprehension. Wolf & Katzir-Cohen (2001) discuss reading fluency as developing in progressions, initially reflecting the development of accuracy and subsequent automaticity at the letter, letter-pattern, and word levels, as well as semantic and syntactic processes at the word and connected-text levels. Once these subskills have been fully developed, fluency next refers to the level of accuracy and rate where decoding is relatively effortless, oral reading is smooth and accurate with suitable expression

and attention can be allocated to comprehension. Certainly, fluency is far more complex than accuracy, rate, and expression, but those remain the cornerstones of reading fluency. However, the role of expression or prosody is still being studied to determine if it contributes to a reader's comprehension or is simply a by-product of it (Arcand, 2014; Groen, 2018; Kuhn et al., 2010).

Assessing Reading Fluency

Possibly the biggest change in current discussions about fluency from 2000 is the widespread, nearly universal use of fluency-based assessments being used to inform decisions in schools regarding screening students and monitoring academic progress (Hosp et al., 2016). The NRP only lightly touched on assessing fluency, devoting just three paragraphs to the topic in a 39-page document. The report listed "a number of informal procedures can be used in the classroom to assess fluency" (p. 3-9): Informal reading inventories, miscue analysis, pausing indices [prosody rating scales], running records, and reading speed calculations [oral reading fluency/ORF], and stated that "[a]ll these assessment procedures require oral reading of text, and all can be used to provide an adequate index of fluency." (p. 3-9).

Today, few would agree that "reading speed calculations" are adequate assessments of reading fluency (Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2019; Hosp & Suchey, 2014; Hudson et al., 2009) primarily because fluency is such a complex construct, with more essential components or facets than simply rate. Hosp & Suchey (2014) suggest that the widely used curriculum-based measure of oral reading fluency (ORF) that typically involves a 60-second assessment of oral reading of one or more unpracticed passages, and is scored as words correct per minute (WCPM) (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2017; Hosp et al., 2016) is actually better conceptualized as a measure of automaticity, rather than fluency. Because ORF assessments include accuracy as part of the measure (*words correct*), it is not simply a measure of rate at the NRP implied.

The use of Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) has greatly expanded since the NRP report (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010; Samuels, 2016). Research, including meta-analyses, has been conducted to determine the reliability and predictive validity of the ORF measures that are commonly used in these frameworks for universal screening, benchmarking, and progress monitoring decisions (Fuchs et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2010; Kluda & Guthrie, 2008; Reschly, 2009; Wayman et al., 2007). These studies consistently find moderate-to-strong correlations between ORF and reading comprehension.

Teaching Reading Fluency

The NRP report addressed fluency instruction by asking this question: “How does one become so fluent in reading that words are recognized accurately, quickly, and with ease and so that a text sounds like spoken language when read aloud?” (NRP, p. 3-10). The panel structured its response around two procedural options: (a) repeated oral reading, and (b) encouraging students to read more, while reading silently.

Repeated Oral Reading

The NRP concluded that the studies they reviewed employed a variety of instructional methods considered to be examples of repeated oral reading and provided a “persuasive case that repeated reading and other procedures that have students reading passages orally multiple times while receiving guidance or feedback from peers, parents, or teachers are effective in improving a variety of reading skills.” (p. 3-20). Setting performance goals for reading and using audio support as a model of fluent reading were also found to be effective for improving fluency and comprehension.

Repeated oral reading with feedback and goal setting continue to be studied and found to demonstrate moderate-to-high effect sizes for reading fluency development using both familiar and unfamiliar texts for students from kindergarten through high school and for students with different reading levels and cognitive skills (Padeliadu & Giazitzidou, 2018), including learning disabilities (Stevens et al., 2017). Some evidence supports the benefits of “wide reading” or “continuous reading” (reading broadly from multiple texts instead of repeated reading) (Hammerschmidt-Snidarich et al., 2019; Kuhn et al., 2010), especially if students’ reading is monitored and they are held accountable for understanding what they are reading (Reutzel, 2008).

Encouraging More, Silent Reading

The NRP examined silent reading within the context of encouraging students to read more using various methods that involved some form of sustained silent reading (SSR). After reviewing the studies on silent reading and SSR, and admitting that none of the studies actually attempted to measure the effect of increased reading on fluency, the NRP concluded that “given the evidence that exists, the Panel cannot conclude that schools should adopt programs to encourage more reading if the intended goal is to improve reading achievement. It is not that studies have proven that this cannot work, only that it is yet unproven” (NRP, p. 3-27).

A more recent study of silent reading showed that two evidence-based routines (Scaffolded Silent Reading [ScSR], and R5 [Read and Relax, Reflect and Respond, Rap]) can be used to enhance students' silent reading fluency development in grades 3-6 (Reutzel & Juth, 2014).

Other Recommendations for Instruction

Our current understanding of the complexity of reading fluency has encouraged researchers to look beyond just accuracy, speed, and expression in their research. Shanahan (2020) suggests fluency instruction be presented as a coordination task that requires the reader to integrate and consolidate their abilities to orchestrate several skills and abilities simultaneously. Ouellette et al. (2017) found that the quality of a reader's orthographic representations, as indexed by spelling accuracy, directly relates to reading speed. Dr. Freddy Heibert studies the effect of text difficulty on reading outcomes through her work at Textproject.org. Dr. Marilyn Adams (2020) in a recent on-line symposium, shared findings that suggest fluency is enhanced by having students read lots of different texts on the same topic, and that the difficulty level of the passage should be challenging for students, once foundational levels of reading accuracy has been established.. Kieffer & Christodoulou (2020) have examined how executive function and reading fluency interact in the reading process.

Further Research Needed

The NRP identified areas where further research in fluency was needed including identifying issues related to oral vs silent reading, the quality and quantity of the guidance needed to improve fluency, and factors related to the texts being read. The panel specifically sought additional research on the value and impact of independent reading because it “[i]s so intuitively appealing and so frequently recommended” (NRP, p. 3-4). They also suggested that research explore if reading too fast was counter-productive and to what extent does comprehension facilitate fluent reading. Twenty years later, these are still areas worthy of additional research to be explored.

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