

1. Increasing Reading Rates for Struggling Readers

Summary: Teachers try numerous strategies to help struggling readers get up to speed. In an article for the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, researchers from the University of California-Riverside discuss the results of a study seeking to understand what conditions create maximum reading fluency gains for struggling readers.

Practical Applications

The authors posed two main questions in their study: First, does the difficulty of text influence struggling students' fluency gains? Second, which aspects of reading are helped by different types of reading practice? To find out, they separated groups of struggling 2nd and 4th graders into three conditions: reading an "independent-level" text out loud to an adult who could assist; reading an "instructional-level" text out loud to an adult; and reading independently. This practice happened 15 minutes a day, three days a week, over 20 weeks.

To the first question, the researchers found:

- The difficulty of the text does *not* influence the rate at which students' fluency improves.
- Students reading out loud to an adult who can assist make significantly higher gains in reading rate than struggling students reading independently (1.4 words/week increase on average for reading with an adult vs. 0.6 words/week for students reading by themselves) – the authors suggest that it may be enough to have an on-track peer instead of an adult, so long as there is someone to give feedback and help students through tough words.
- The majority of reading rate gains occurred in weeks 10-20, suggesting that teachers should not abandon reading interventions if they don't see early results.

To the second question, the researchers found:

- Students reading out loud to adults showed more improvement in reading rate and word recognition (i.e. sight words) than students in the control condition.
- Students reading out loud to adults *did not* show an increase in decoding skills or vocabulary vs. the control group, suggesting that "...poor readers need explicit instruction in word parts..." as well as robust instruction in vocabulary.
- Fluency growth had a huge impact on reading comprehension (accounting for over 80% of comprehension growth on longer passages), indicating that for struggling readers even more than on-track readers, reading fluency is a key bridge to comprehension.

Conclusion and Citation

Although "fluency practice should not take the place of well-rounded reading instruction," fluency is tremendously important for struggling readers. Since they have less ability to self-correct, these readers in particular seem to need some form of consistent feedback as they are reading, regardless of the difficulty of the text. Over time, with support, struggling readers' fluency can significantly improve.

O'Connor, R. et al. "Improvement in reading rate under independent and difficult text levels: Influences on word and comprehension skills." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 102.1 (2010), 1-19. <http://tinyurl.com/3aq3ebb> (subscription only).