Second-language Literacy Instruction: Five Principles for Effective Fluency Development

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Abstract
Reading fluency development has played a critical role in English L1 settings for the last 30 years, yet despite its success it has attracted limited attention in L2 and foreign language contexts, presumably because it is thought to grow naturally as other reading skills develop. Therefore, many L2 teachers give little, if any, recognition to reading fluency development as an essential curriculum goal. For teachers wishing to give reading fluency instruction a more prominent role in their classroom, several methods have been developed that have proven successful for struggling readers in English L1 environments. Fortunately, the methods shown to be effective in helping lower proficiency readers develop fluency suggest a set of principles that teachers may find helpful in designing regular classroom activities for fluency development in the L2 classroom.
Introduction
While there is not a clear consensus on exactly how to define reading fluency, most teachers and researchers generally agree that it refers to the smooth and natural oral production of written text. Fluent readers combine high rates of speed, accuracy and fluidity, and are able to maintain their performance over time. Fluent readers are also able to sustain their facility with reading over periods of no practice and can demonstrate their skills across a wide variety of texts. If reading aloud, fluent readers are able to make the text flow in an even, steady stream of words.

Zutell and Rasinski (1991) offer a more restricted definition of oral fluency that applies only to the oral aspect of proficient reading. In their words, oral fluency takes place when:

(a) the reading is fairly effortless or automatic, (b) readers group or “chunk” words into meaningful phrases or clauses, and (c) readers use pitch, stress and intonation appropriately to convey the meanings and feelings they believe the author intended (p. 212).

Although simple and rapid word recognition is an important feature of fluent reading, Zutell & Rasinski, assert that excessive attention to exact word matching may lead students to attend to individual words at the expense of other aspects of fluency. Purposely left out of their definition is accurate word recognition, good comprehension, amount of reading, and positive affect associated with reading. Automaticity Theory (DeKeyser, 2001) may explain the accurate and effortless decoding that fluent readers exhibit, but it does not account for the role prosody in reading plays. There is no doubt these factors do contribute to high degrees of word accuracy and understanding and the view that reading is pleasurable. However their concept of oral fluency revolves around the extent to which reading “sounds” like speaking, that is, how much of it accommodates the rhythms, cadences and flow of oral language.

The purpose of this article is to suggest five fluency-building principles for reading and to describe ways of implementing each principle. These principles can be used to help make decisions regarding classroom content and curriculum and to help
create a more language-rich learning environment in which students (and teachers alike) can feel comfortable as they progress toward the goal of reading fluently in a second or foreign language (L2). The principles, elucidated below are: read easy material, repeated reading, strategy-based study, phrases first, and the teacher as the source.

**Principle 1: Read Easy Material**

Paul Nation (2009) has suggested that in a well-balanced L2 course there are roughly equal opportunities for learning through four equal strands: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, focus on form, and fluency development.

Nation’s fourth strand, fluency development, calls for students to make the best use of what they already know by working with known material across the four skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking. Reading fluency development occurs when all of what the learners read is largely familiar to them. In other words, there is no unknown language, or largely unfamiliar content or discourse features.

According to Nation (2007,) if an activity involves unknown vocabulary, it is not a fluency activity. If the focus is on language features, it is not a fluency activity. If there is no push to go faster, it is not a fluency activity.

Thus, reading fluency is best developed when the content is at or just below the learners’ developmental reading level. Although there is value in reading challenging content, it is important to keep in mind that learners engaged in material above their independent reading level cannot focus enough of their attention on meeting the cognitive demands of reading fluently; too many of their brain resources are being diverted to decoding, on-line processing, and comprehension (DeKeyser, 2001; Samuels, 1979.)

It is also important to keep in mind that if reading fluency is the goal, any text that slows comprehension or is too difficult should not be used. Passages containing more than one unknown word in 10 are generally considered “frustrating,” however Hirsh and Nation (1992) raise the bar, suggesting that one or two in every 100 words be considered the optimum number of unknown words for L2 learners.
Basal readers, graded readers and industry trade texts are excellent choices for fluency development because they are written with controlled vocabulary and use word lists based on frequency of occurrence. Using word lists ensures students are at their appropriate developmental reading level. Teachers can also grade authentic material by rewriting it to meet their learners’ needs or by offering students the opportunity to reread texts.

**Principle 2: Repeated Reading**

Repeated reading is one of the best known and most widely used instructional techniques designed to support fluency. It consists of re-reading a short, meaningful passage silently or orally until the reader is able to read it with ease. The procedure is then repeated with a new passage. Samuels (1979) demonstrated that this method helps students develop word recognition skills to the point of automaticity, a necessary level of processing for fluent reading to occur. Central to the theory of automaticity is that gains made through repeated reading of one text are transferable to new, previously unread texts. Learners who participate in repeated reading programs may engage in unassisted repeated reading where no model of a text is supplied or in assisted repeated reading programs, which use live or taped models (Samuels, 1979; Taguchi, Takayasu & Gorsuch 2004; Samuels, Schermer & Reinking, 1992).

Providing learners with repeated exposure to texts builds their reading self-confidence and helps them avoid frustrations such as lack of comprehension arising from slower reading (Nuttall, 1996). It may also help contribute to the formation of lifelong reading habits (Roberts & Wilson, 2006) or help such habits to form.

Repeated reading can also be beneficial for teachers. Having students read aloud gives teachers a clear window into the reading process by allowing them the chance to hear their students’ oral production of written text. By listening to their students read aloud, teachers can focus on the sub skills associated with fluent reading such as word recognition, phonological awareness, prosody, vocabulary, and comprehension.

There are several ways this type of instruction can be implemented including:
choral reading, echo reading, shared reading, shadowing and paired reading. It can also be carried out with groups of students, on a one-to-one basis or with students working independently with a cassette, CD or digital sound file. Teachers wishing to promote social interaction or to manage instruction in large class settings may opt for paired reading because of its communicative nature.

**Table 1.**

**Five principles for building fluency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Technique</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read easy material</td>
<td><em>Simplified texts (basal readers, trade books, graded readers)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeated reading</td>
<td><em>Reread texts; Use oral, choral and paired reading; timed and CD-assisted reading</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy-based study</td>
<td><em>Teach metacognitive strategies and suprasegmentals</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrases first</td>
<td><em>Encourage chunking</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as a the source</td>
<td><em>Set aside class time to read aloud, be a model “reader”</em></td>
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**Principle 3: Strategy-Based Study**

Research conducted on strategy use suggests that struggling learners are able to improve their skills through training and guidance displayed by more successful learners. The same is true of reading strategies: struggling readers are able to improve through training and guidance in strategies displayed by more successful readers, (Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989).

Metacognition is the awareness and understanding of one's own thinking and cognitive processes. It refers to the ability of an individual to reflect upon, select, and use the most appropriate learning strategy to overcome a task. Metacognition is an essential feature of reading fluency and takes place instantaneously as the reading process occurs. Reading comprehension strategies such as summarizing, predicting, mapping, and imagery are critical to the development of reading fluency, but will do
little to promote it without deliberate and direct study and training in such metacognitive strategies (Boulware-Goeden, Carreker, Thornhill, & Joshi 2007).

Teachers wishing to incorporate strategy-based study in their classrooms should first acquire texts slightly beyond what their learners could access without strategies, but easy enough for their students to employ the strategies while practicing autonomously. Handouts such as graphic aids and organizers can be especially helpful when teaching strategies, particularly for more “visual learners.”

Thinking out loud allows learners to follow the thought process. By verbalizing what they are thinking, teachers can cast light on the sequence of steps students should take while engaging in strategy use. For example, what to do when encountering a difficult word or looking for a specific detail in a passage. Encourage students to use ‘attack strategies’ such as contextual clues, root words and other techniques such as breaking down longer sentences or making connections to things they may already know. Other fluency-building strategies include previewing, predicting, skimming, scanning, guessing from context, paraphrasing, and asking learners to think about how they read in their native language.

Another strategy for improving reading fluency is to teach suprasegmentals. Suprasegmentals are the stress, rhythm and timing used to convey meaning when reading or speaking aloud. Just as L2 students can learn the rules of grammar, so too can they learn the rules of intonation. Teaching learners the rules of proper pronunciation, rhythm and flow will help them to find and cultivate their own personal reading voice.

**Principle 4: Phrases First**

In addition to guided practice with metacognitive strategies, learners need to “see” words in groups of three-, four-, and five-word units. Many students struggling with fluency read words one at a time, saying the words to themselves. This is a slow way of doing the task, especially when the mind is capable of reading and processing information at much faster rates. Rather than looking down and seeing a passage as hundreds of disconnected, individual words, learners need to see and read words in
groups or larger phrasal aggregates. “Chunking” refers to the grouping of words into units, whether as collocations, lexical stems, idiomatically, or more commonly as simple, formulaic expressions.

One way to encourage students to read in chunks is to use newspapers. Because most newspaper articles are written in columns, learners can practice reading a full line at a time. The “read-and-look-up” technique is another method that can help learners work with larger basic units. With this technique, a student reads a phrase or sentence silently as many times as necessary, then looks up (and away from the text) and tells a partner what the phrase or sentence says (NCLRC, n.d.). Although this activity works best in pairs, students can also work alone at home using a mirror as a reference point for practice.

**Principle 5: Teacher as the Source**

Teachers can influence the actions of their students in number of ways. A simple and direct technique for influencing the behavior of learners is by demonstrating or modeling. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) asserts that people learn from one another by means of observational learning and that valued, high-status models can positively affect the perceived importance of an activity. Teachers can elicit a desirable behavioral response from their students by providing them with ongoing visual and aural feedback.

There are several ways teachers can apply Social Learning Theory to the teaching of reading in their classrooms. First, they can model fluent reading by setting aside time to read aloud to learners as often as possible. Second, they can set an example by being avid readers themselves, showing up to class with a book under their arm and sharing plot lines from interesting stories they read recently with the class.

Auditory modeling, either live or taped, is one of the easiest and most effective ways to boost readers’ oral fluency and reading comprehension. For teachers who lack confidence in themselves as fluent or accurate readers it is important to remember that in most instances the teacher – whether native speaker or not – is the best reader in the room.
Conclusion

Reading fluency is a skill that, regrettably, many L2 students seem to lack. This inability can leave them feeling frustrated, even fearful of the act of reading. Fortunately, research conducted in L1 settings suggests a set of pedagogical principles educators can apply in their own classrooms to teach and develop the skill of reading fluently in L2. These principles can also influence instruction by allowing teachers to assess their course syllabus and course materials for strengths and weaknesses. Although fluency development appears best suited for beginning readers who have difficulty with pacing, expression, or word recognition, mature readers can benefit from the practice too. Providing opportunities to read age-appropriate, authentic content such as prose, poetry, novels, and newspapers is excellent practice for learners with some ability to read because it gives them a chance to integrate skills they have already begun to acquire such as speed, flow, fluidity and comprehension (Dowhower, 1989; Koskinen & Blum, 1986).

With these principles, teachers can create a more language-rich learning environment in which students both enjoy learning to read and make substantial gains in their attempts to acquire a foreign language.
References


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