

The Impact of Fluency Folders  
on First Graders' Reading Levels

by

Peggy Sue Naugle

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of an additional classroom-based fluency intervention on first graders' reading levels. Fluency Folders were used in order to improve student's fluency and reading skills. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Reading Assessment was used to identify the instructional level of the students. The study included a pretest and posttest design model to measure the students' reading level growth. Findings from the intervention indicated an overall increase in reading level scores for students who were initially reading below grade level expectations.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Teaching a child to read is not only a fundamental part of an educator's job but also the extremely rewarding. In order to become a fluent reader, a student must master three aspects of reading: phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension. These skills take time to develop and are contingent on one another.

When examining fluency, a teacher must look at two essential components: automaticity and prosody. Automaticity refers to the ability to recognize words automatically or effortlessly. Prosody is the expressive phrasing and intonation readers use as they read a selected text. "Prosody completes the bridge by connecting to comprehension" (Rasinski, 2012, p. 517). If fluency is not achieved, a child will spend most of their time focusing on decoding words. This then would impact their ability to comprehend the text because they were focusing so intently on reading the words correctly, that they were unable to focus on the events or information of the story. Fluency is essential for a child becoming a successful reader.

Various instructional strategies can be implemented to build a child's reading fluency. An example of one strategy could be using Fluency Folders. In this study, selected students who are reading below current grade level expectations will participate in added fluency intervention through the use of Fluency Folders two to three times a week for fifteen minutes. During this time of added fluency practice, they will receive phonics and sight word practice. There will be additional focus on repeated readings of sight word sentences found in student Fluency Folders. These Fluency Folders contain sight words, sight word phrases and sentences.

## **Statement of Problem**

The purpose of this study was to implement a classroom-based intervention, Fluency Folders, that would improve the reading level, based on Fountas & Pinnell assessments, of students in first grade.

## **Hypothesis**

The simple hypothesis is that a first-grade student will improve their reading level, based on Fountas & Pinnell assessments, through the use of fluency folders.

## **Operational Definitions**

A select number of students who are reading below current first grade level expectations will be included in the treatment group. Their reading levels are based on their performance on the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Assessment performed in January of 2019. This assessment recommends a placement level for instruction, identifies students who need intervention and extra support, and monitors student progress across a school year.

The independent variable will be the guided instruction students are receiving with their Fluency Folders. During the treatment, the use of Fluency Folders focuses on phonics review, sight words and sentences to practice sight word identification, speed and accuracy. They will also be exposed to modeled fluency.

The dependent variable for the study will be the change in students' reading level and/or fluency performance on the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Assessment from January to May of 2019.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Reading fluency and related topics are addressed in this review of literature. The first section explains some of the reading fluency norms and standard expectations. Section two discusses some major differences or characteristics between fluent and non-fluent readers. The relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension and its direct correlation is described in section three. Section four discusses the impact quality reading fluency instruction has on assessments. Finally, section five discusses important information about reading fluency assessments.

#### **Reading Fluency Norms**

Reading proficiency is multi-dimensional. Aspects of proficiency include reading rate, accuracy, and expression. They used to determine whether a student is a proficient reader or not. Reading fluency is a major part of becoming a proficient reader. As Hasbrouck and Tindal said, “many teachers and reading specialists are now focusing significant attention on developing their students’ fluency skills” (2006, p. 636). Educators are now beginning to shift their focus from the traditional aspects of a good reader, such as phonemic awareness, to reading fluency. There are many reasons why becoming a fluent and proficient reader is important. For example, “Poor fluency can lead to literacy problems later in [students’] education” (Harrison, 2011, p. 3).

Reading rate is the rate at which a student reads a text. This is typically measured in words per minute (WPM). Reading rate is a major aspect of reading fluency. The teacher is looking to see if the student is reading too slow or too fast. There are various reading assessments that test a child’s reading rate. Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006) compares oral reading fluency scores to a thermometer. When interpreting first graders’ oral reading fluency, or reading



rate scores, she states, “First grade students who are reading 40 or more WCPM on unpracticed text passages are by the end of the year are at low risk of future reading difficulty, while students below 40 WCPM are at some risk, and students reading below 20 WCPM are at high risk of failure” (p. 640). This example demonstrates the importance of reading rate scores and how it impacts a student’s reading fluency.

Reading accuracy refers to the ability to read words without making mistakes or the number of mistakes made when reading. Reading accuracy is an essential part of reading fluency and in turn, reading comprehension. If the student cannot read the words accurately, then it will make it difficult to comprehend what was read. Gloria Harrison from Walden University studied why students' fluency rates were not increasing. In this study she states, “Students must read with a 98% accuracy level in order to comprehend the text completely” (Harrison, 2011, p. 20). On most reading assessments, students must achieve 98% accuracy to be seen as a fluent reader.

Reading with expression is a skill that fluent readers must demonstrate. Reading expression is the ability to change your voice to show feeling while reading. This is usually the last aspect of reading fluency that is mastered by young readers. In a study about the relationship between oral reading fluency and reading proficiency, Kathy Jones states, “The degree of expression can indicate students’ understanding of the passage” (2010, p.35). Essentially, when students are able to read a passage with expression, or fluently, they have a better understanding of the text.

### **Differences Between a Fluent Reader and a Non-Fluent Reader**

When determining whether a child is a fluent or a non-fluent reader, there are some characteristics to consider. These characteristics include reading rate, pausing, phrasing, stress, and intonation. In terms of reading rate, “Skilled readers can read a word and, within 150

milliseconds, less than the time it takes for the heart to beat once, the brain has attached meaning to the word” (Jones, 2010, p. 20). Furthermore, fluent readers know when the meaning of the text tells them to slow down their reading or speed it up. Pausing is how students are reading the punctuation of the text. Making sure students stop at periods, pause for commas, raise their voice when they see a question mark, and even lower their voice when they come to a period. If they do not read both the punctuation and the words, they probably struggle with pausing. Phrasing is the way readers put words together in groups or phrases. A fluent reader clumps words together in a way that makes sense whereas a non-fluent reader reads phrases in a very disjointed or choppy manner. In a study differentiating fluent and non-fluent readers, Shirley Alt discusses stages that beginning readers go through on their journey to becoming fluent. Alt (2011) states, “At first, there is a non-accurate stage where the beginning reader has trouble identifying words. This is followed by an accuracy stage where reading is accurate but slow, halting, expressionless, and effortful, and word identification still requires mental effort” (p. 20). Stress is essentially the emphasis readers place on particular words. They read a more important word louder to reflect the meaning of that word. They notice important words and put an emphasis or a stress on them when reading aloud. Non-fluent readers typically exhibit more monotone voices. Finally, intonation is the way the reader changes the pitch, tone, and volume to reflect meaning as they read.

When determining whether a student is a fluent reader, reading rate is highly considered. Reading rate is how fast or slow the child is reading. If a child is reading a text too slow, it can be difficult for them to understand the text. If a child is reading too fast, they often skip words and do not comprehend what they read. Shirley Alt (2011) analyzes the different stages to becoming a fluent reader and states, “During Stage 4 there is an increase in ability evidenced by

an increase in accuracy, speed, expression and comprehension. The final stage, Stage 5, incorporates metacognition or the monitoring of comprehension of the passage being read. Fluent readers decode words automatically and place their attention on comprehension and the monitoring of that comprehension” (p.22). This statement demonstrates the connection reading fluency has to reading comprehension. A student cannot begin to comprehend the text they are reading if they are not decoding words automatically.

### **The Relationship Between Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension**

Teachers in all states assess their students’ reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Although teachers of different states, even different counties, use different assessment tools, most reading assessments look at those three aspects of a reader. Typically reading is taught in a sequential order: accuracy, fluency, then comprehension. Each skill is important to acquire before moving onto the next, and each builds on the other. Consequently, reading fluency affects a child’s comprehension.

In a study of the developmental relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension performed by Young-Suk Kim, Richard Wagner, and Danielle Lopex (2012), which was released by the National Institute of Health, the researchers state, “Our results showed that oral and silent reading fluency were not uniquely related to reading comprehension in the beginning phase of reading (i.e., first grade) once list reading fluency and listening comprehension were taken into account” (p. 11). When a child is beginning to read and the texts are of less complexity, Kim et al. found that there was no direct correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension. “In contrast, when children’s reading skills are more advanced (e.g., grade two), oral or silent reading fluency became independently related to

reading comprehension” (p. 11). As students’ reading levels advance and texts become more complex, reading comprehension is contingent on the child’s reading fluency.

### **The Influence of Reading Fluency Instruction on Assessment**

Quality reading fluency instruction must be implemented in a classroom in order to reflect growth on reading assessments. Several classroom-based instructional practices include: repeated reading, reader’s theatre, and amplification. These strategies are thoroughly explained in the 2005 edition of *The Reading Teacher*, by Roxanne Hudson, Holly Lane, and Paige Pullen.

Repeated reading is a common practice used in classrooms today. It consists of selecting a short passage at one’s instructional level, setting a reading rate criterion, and having the student read and reread the passage over time until the reading rate criterion is reached (Hudson et al., 2005). This method focuses on increasing the reading rate and accuracy of the reader. Students will begin to chunk phrases together and increase high frequency word recognition through the use of this strategy.

Reader’s Theatre is an enjoyable form of repeated reading where students can perform to an audience. Teachers can use this method of repeated reading to increase students’ reading accuracy, rate, and prosody (Hudson, et al., 2005). In this practice, a teacher selects or creates a script based on children’s literature. The teacher then reads it aloud to the students leading a discussion about the characters and how they might sound different. Students then practice reading the script while assigning the various roles. Rehearsing and performing the script for the class provides students with purpose and enjoyment of rereading the text several times. Reader’s theatre can use a variety of text which include songs, scripts, poetry, and plays. The rereading of these texts lends themselves to prosodic reading. Prosodic reading is the ability to read with expression and intonation.

Amplification is a strategy used by many primary educators when teaching young children to read. This method is simply as it sounds, the amplification of one's voice in order to promote reading fluency. This is most commonly done through the use of whisper phones: "Whisper phones are pieces of PVC pipe elbows connected to form a telephone shape. This shape amplifies the sound of the student's voice but only to the student" (Hudson et al., 2005, p. 712). When non-fluent readers have the opportunity to hear their own voice, this can promote self-awareness and suggest goals for improvement

These instructional practices are used to improve reading fluency scores on assessments. Teachers can base instruction off of students' scores. Aimee Cribbs (2013) reports a survey study about teachers in rural and urban parts of Georgia and some of their misconceptions about reading fluency, instruction, and assessment. One point she makes is, "Evidence suggested the need to clarify the intended use of oral reading fluency assessment scores with educators and administrators to guide appropriate instructional decision-making" (p. xi). This states that a misuse of reading fluency scores results in poor instructional decisions. Teachers must understand that increase performance of fluency does not warrant a proficient reader yet. "A rise in ORF scores does not cause or guarantee a rise in reading ability or performance on high-stakes tests, nor does a high ORF score guarantee comprehension" (p. 8).

Reading fluency is often assessed in the running record assessments that teachers use for their county. For example, Anne Arundel County in Maryland uses the reading assessment called Fountas & Pinnell. Students read a text while the teacher follows along annotating what the child says and does, a running record. This running record is used to assess a student's accuracy, fluency, and comprehension of a text. Teachers use the data from these assessments to drive their instruction. If they see a group of students who have a high accuracy percentage but a low

fluency score, she may instruct those specific students on fluency rather than accuracy. Teachers can also determine what type of fluency errors students make. If they experience difficulty with phrasing, a teacher might work with them on a chunking activity whereas other students might have different needs.

### **Reading Fluency Assessment**

Reading fluency assessment is used to test students' accuracy and reading rate. In the 2010 edition of the *Reading Research Quarterly*, by Sheila Valencia, Anthony Smith, Anne Reece, Min Li, Karen Wixson, and Heather Newman, there is an article regarding oral reading fluency assessments. In this article it states, "Rate and accuracy are combined to yield a metric of wcpm; expression and phrasing are not directly assessed" in these assessments (Valencia, et al., 2010, p. 272). When referring to WCPM, it means words correct per minute that a student read. The WCPM score is considered the reading rate at which students read per minute. Accuracy is the words the student read correctly or incorrectly. Although using assessments like this to determine a student's fluency is often used, Valencia et al. discusses how it should not be the only measure of identifying students true abilities: "When separate indicators of oral reading fluency (rate, accuracy, prosody, passage comprehension) were used in assessment, the result provided a finer grained understanding of oral reading fluency and fluency assessment" (p. 285). As previously stated, reading fluency includes reading rate, pausing, phrasing, stress, and intonation. Assessments must look at all these characteristics in order to truly assess if a student is a fluent reader, not just reading rate and accuracy.

### **Summary**

Fluency is essential in the development of a proficient reader. The ability to automatically identify words while reading at an appropriate pace leads to comprehension of text. As a result, if

fluency is not mastered, then sufficient comprehension is not attainable. Fluent readers spend less time decoding words and instead focus their attention on what texts mean. Aspects of a fluent reader include reading rate, pausing, phrasing, stress, and intonation. Specific instructional strategies should be implemented to help readers develop fluency.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of implementing Fluency Folders on improving reading levels in struggling readers based on data from the Fountas & Pinnell assessment.

#### **Design**

This study is based on the quasi-experimental design. Students were assessed using the Fountas and Pinnell assessment to determine their instructional reading level in February 2019. Students' fluency scores were analyzed by looking at their accuracy with the text and their overall fluency score. The accuracy is calculated by looking at the number of errors made while reading the text. The fluency score is determined by the assessor based on phrasing, expressive interpretation, pausing, attention to punctuation, appropriate stress and rate. The score is based on a numeric scale of 0, 1, 2, or 3; 3 being considered a fluent reader and 0 a non-fluent reader.

First grade students who were reading at least one reading level below the current grade level expectation were selected to partake in the intervention. This group consisted of nine students. These nine students struggled with sight word identification, decoding, and fluency. Their reading fluency also impacted their comprehension of various texts. These nine students participated in daily intervention strategies to improve their fluency scores.

#### **Participants**

In this study, the participants were nine first grade students. The school used in this research is located in a suburban area in Anne Arundel County. There are 576 students within grades Kindergarten through 5th grade. The student population is diverse, and families consist of low to middle class socio-economic status.



The nine first grade students were selected to participate in the intervention group due to their scores on the winter administration of the Fountas & Pinnell reading assessment. These students performed below the current grade level expectation for reading. Of the nine students, six students were boys and three students were girls. The ages of the students were 7 years old with one student being 8 years old. The races of the students are as follows: five students were Caucasian, one student was African-American, one student was Asian, and two students were Hispanic. Three of the students were in the English Language Learners (ELL) program. In addition, one student is hearing impaired and wears a hearing aid.

### **Instrument**

For this study, Fountas and Pinnell reading levels were used to determine student grouping. The researcher used this reading assessment for both pre-test and post-test data. Points of data include reading accuracy and overall fluency score.

### **Procedure**

Students' Fountas and Pinnell instructional reading level scores were used to determine who would participate in this research project. Nine students were selected since they were reading at least one level below the current grade level expectation for first grade. They received additional support with the intervention strategy of a fluency folder to help improve their reading fluency in order to increase their reading level scores.

After the group was decided upon, the researcher then immediately implemented the intervention strategy with the group of students. The Fluency Folders included sight words and sentences to practice sight word identification, speed and accuracy.

The duration of this action research project lasted approximately 8 weeks. The students would meet with the researcher two to three times a week for fifteen minutes. During this time,

the researcher would go over sight words, demonstrate how to read with expression and characteristics of a fluent reader. The researcher closely monitored all nine students through informal observations during this time. The post-test was administered in May using the Fountas & Pinnell reading assessment to analyze progress with accuracy and overall fluency score.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether first grade students receiving a fluency intervention two to three times a week over a 6-week span would make significant improvement in their reading level. This study was based on the quasi-experimental design and measured the students' reading level based on Fountas & Pinnell assessments. The students who participated in the study were chosen based on their reading performance on the winter Fountas & Pinnell benchmark reading assessment that was given prior to the start of the intervention period.

The results of the students' post test data, based on their spring Fountas & Pinnell levels, was made quantifiable by giving a numeric value to the letter level. A Fountas & Pinnell level A would be represented by the number 1, the level B would be represented by the number 2, etc. This was done in order to find the mean and median data of their results. The results are presented below in Table 1. Students participating in the fluency intervention grew on average 3.56 levels and the median growth is 3 levels; therefore, the hypothesis that students will not improve their reading level, based on Fountas & Pinnell assessments, through the use of fluency folders was not supported. The implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

Table 1.

*Pre and Post Test Data Results for First Grade Students Receiving Fluency Intervention*

Statistics				
	Pretest Numerical Level	Posttest Numerical Level	Level Increase	Is the median of level increased significantly different from 3?
Student Count	9	9	9	No (p=0.595)
Mean	4.00	7.56	3.56	
Median	3.00	7.00	3.00	

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

Students were selected to participate in this quasi-experimental design study based on their winter Fountas & Pinnell reading levels. These students were selected because their reading levels were below the current grade level expectation of a level H. After collecting the pre-test data, winter F&P score, the mean of the intervention group was 4, which equates to a level D. The median score of the intervention group was a 3, or a level C. The fluency intervention lasted six weeks, and students met two to three times a week. The post test data was collected from the spring Fountas & Pinnell administration. When analyzing the post test data, the mean score was a 7.56, in between a level G and H. The median score of the data was a 7, or a reading level G. The original simple hypothesis stating that students will improve their reading level, based on Fountas & Pinnell assessments, through the use of fluency folders was accepted. All students in the test group increased their reading levels by at least 1.

#### **Implications of Results**

The results from this experiment explicitly show the effectiveness of the fluency folders and their use as an intervention. The hypothesis stated that the students' reading levels would improve through the use of these fluency folders. The hypothesis was accepted due to all students increasing their reading level.

#### **Theoretical Consequences**

Based on recent research, students who are non-fluent readers go through stages when improving their reading accuracy. According to Alt (2011), "At first, there is a non-accurate stage where the beginning reader has trouble identifying words. This is followed by an accuracy stage where reading is accurate but slow, halting, expressionless, and effortful, and word

identification still requires mental effort” (p. 20). This agrees with my findings from the study I executed. When first beginning my intervention, most of the students had trouble identifying or decoding unknown words. The students would often pause, look to me for the answer, and struggle through the sentences. As the weeks went on, students began to be able to identify words that were previously difficult for them, but their reading remained monotone and expressionless. Finally, as the study came to a close, most of the students were reading with speed, intonation and expression.

Another finding from research is that oral reading fluency does not guarantee a rise in reading scores on assessments. Cribbs (2013) states, “A rise in ORF scores does not cause or guarantee a rise in reading ability or performance on high-stakes tests, nor does a high ORF score guarantee comprehension” (p. 8). This is interesting because the findings from my research contradict this. All the students in my treatment group increased their Fountas & Pinnell reading scores based on assessment. When comparing to their reading fluency during the intervention to their assessment scores, there are variations. Of the treatment group, five students entered reading at a level C, and all were non-fluent readers. After the study was conducted and students were reevaluated on their reading level, one student increased two levels, two students increased three levels, and two students increased seven reading levels. All five of these students were much more fluent readers than they were at the beginning of the study. This data shows that a rise in oral reading fluency does guarantee a rise in reading scores on assessment, and the rise on assessments may vary.

## **Threats to Validity**

There were several threats to validity that emerged during this study: time for the intervention, some students received hours with the Special Educator, and some students were in an online reading intervention program called Ticket to Read.

The first threat to validity is the amount of time for the intervention. This time was short and possibly could have limited the effectiveness of the intervention or the amount of student growth. The amount of time the researcher met with the students was fifteen minutes two to three times a week. The below-level students could have benefitted from a longer intervention period. Several days were lost due to weather conditions closing school early, delaying the opening of school or having no school at all. This caused some students to receive more time than others.

An additional threat to validity is that one student received hours with the ELL teacher and three students received hours with the Special Educator. The English Language Learners (ELL) in the treatment group received additional support. Students who are ELL typically struggle with reading fluency because English is not their first language at home. Their pronunciation, grammar, and phonetic sounds sometimes impacted the way they read, interpreted sounds, and decoded words. Three students in the treatment group receive additional support from the special educator. They were pulled to participate in a research-based intervention called FUNdations daily. This intervention program works explicitly on improving decoding, blending, and other vital reading strategies.

The final threat to validity that could have affected the posttest scores of five students is the participation in an online reading intervention called Ticket to Read. Five students in the treatment group also received this online reading intervention at least three days per week for

varying amounts of times. This online program assesses students' current needs and provides them with literacy-based activities to help improved their reading accuracy and fluency.

Despite all these threats to validity, all students improved their reading levels with the help of fluency folders.

### **Connections to Existing Literature**

Results from another study conducted by Mary San Juan (2018) from Goucher College indicated that through the use of fluency folders, students' reading fluency will improve. From this study, students were broken into two groups, low and high. The "low group" consisted of students reading below the current third grade level expectation by three or more levels. The "high group" consisted of students reading on or below the current third grade level expectation by one to two levels. Both subgroups showed growth in their words correct per minute (WCPM) score. This study was done over a five-week period. Students in this study were exposed to the use of Fluency Folders, Reader's Theatre, as well as Ticket to Read.

The study performed by San Juan showed a lot of parallels to this study of reading fluency folders. In both studies, some students were reading well below grade level, but this study had no students reading on level participate. In addition, the use of fluency folders was proven effective in both studies, but San Juan used two additional interventions on her subgroups. A major difference between both studies is San Juan collected weekly data on the students' words correct per minute (WCPM) score where I used the winter and spring Fountas & Pinnell data.

## **Implications for Further Research**

When reflecting on this study and this impact it had on the students, there are three variables for future research. These variables include weekly assessments, parent or home involvement, and duration or frequency of the intervention.

For this study, the researcher collected pre and post test data on the students using the reading assessment of Fountas & Pinnell. This assessment compiles information such as accuracy, fluency, self-correction rate, words read per minute, and comprehension scores. These areas are analyzed and combined to formulate a reading level in letter form for the student. The researcher found that it may be beneficial to use weekly assessments that evaluate student's words correct per minute score (WCPM) for future research. This could provide more information about how well the student's fluency is increasing or not increasing.

Another variable to be considered for future research would be including parent or home involvement in this study. This study was strictly conducted in the classroom, and the fluency folders were left at school. The researcher wonders what impact parent involvement could have on the student's reading level increase. If the student took the folder home every night and weekend to use at home with their parents, how might it impact their reading.

Finally, frequency and duration of the intervention may impact the students' success. The duration of this study was six weeks. The researcher met with the group of students for about fifteen minutes, two to three times a week. Increasing the number of times per week met with the students and/or the length of time with the students could possibly further increase their reading levels.



## **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to determine if the use of fluency folders would impact struggling readers and increase their reading level scores. The results showed that fluency folders did affect these students and help increase their abilities as young readers.

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