

Improving Fluency of My First Grade Students

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Abstract

The purpose of reading is to gain meaning from various texts. In order to gain meaning, students must exhibit strong fluency skills. Researchers suggest multiple instructional strategies that teachers of all grade levels can implement into reading instruction to strengthen fluency skills. The purpose of this study is to measure the impact of various intervention strategies in order to improve first graders' fluency. The results show that the intervention strategies used in this design had a positive impact on first graders' fluency.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Reading has been described as the gateway to learning. The primary purpose of reading is to gain meaning from various texts. In order to gain meaning from a text, a student must demonstrate good fluency. As students improve fluency, their reading becomes purposeful and meaningful as their comprehension will improve.

Learning to read is very complex. Understanding printed language involves knowledge of decoding, vocabulary, text structure, sight words, comprehension strategies, fluency, and more (Stahl & Yaden, 2004). First, a student develops the identification of the letters of the alphabet. Next, students begin to associate the sound that corresponds to each letter, ultimately demonstrating their understanding of the connection between the letters and the sounds they make. Stahl and Yaden explain that these are the beginning stages of developing phonemic awareness, which is the ability to distinguish between individual letter sounds in written language. Students will then use those words to form phrases and sentences in meaningful ways. Students with a solid understanding of these skills are typically considered fluent readers.

Fluency is defined as the student's ability to read written language naturally and accurately. Fluent reading is reading in which words are read quickly, accurately, and with expression by being recognized automatically (Nunez, 2009). Students who demonstrate a high level of reading proficiency read with a sense of feeling, anticipation, or characterization in their reading. Fluency has two essential components: automaticity and prosody. Automaticity refers to the ability to recognize words automatically or effortlessly. Prosody completes the bridge by connecting to comprehension (Rasinski, 2012). Comprehension is important to take into

consideration when determining a student's fluency score. Typically, students with high fluency rates have higher levels of reading proficiencies in reading comprehension.

Fluency researchers have examined the validity of teaching fluency and how much it improves reading achievement (Slee, 2008). Fluency is an essential skill that connects automaticity to comprehension in order for students to process meaning (Johnson, 2011). Research on evidence-based practices in beginning reading has concluded that beginning reading instruction should be composed of certain key instructional components with one of those components being fluency (Slee, 2008). In order for a child to be fluent, he or she must be a master at decoding, so teachers need to ensure that an adequate amount of instruction is dedicated to modeling and teaching phonics so students' decoding skills develop. Fluency also effects comprehension. Being able to fluidly read material makes it easier for a student to comprehend what they are reading since little effort is being used to sound out words. Reading comprehension illustrates the mastery of other reading skills, such as fluency and vocabulary. Students who demonstrate lower fluency rates in the primary grades tend to struggle in the intermediate grades. In the intermediate grades there is a growing number of studies that have shown that lower fluency rates are a major concern (Rasinski, 2012). Implementing fluency into reading instruction should not stop in the primary grades. In fact, it should continue throughout a student's educational career.

There are many different instructional reading strategies that teachers can implement in reading instruction to strengthen and reinforce fluency. Debatably the most crucial is for teachers to model appropriate fluency (Cahill & Gregory, 2011). Other instructional strategies include guided reading or small group reading, paired and choral reading, and repeated reading such as Reader's Theatre, poems, song lyrics, and speeches. Consistent practice with sight words and

phrases are also important to include into daily instruction. Students need to become automatic with sight words and phrases while reading. This will only support their fluency.

In this study, students who demonstrate lower fluency rates are participating in daily guided reading instruction, along with daily exposure to sight word and phrase card practice. Guided reading is a requirement in our reading curriculum, so this aspect of the study will be a continuation of what they normal participate in. The difference will be the implementation of phrase cards and sight word practice. Guided reading will focus on the phonics aspect of reading whereas the sight word and phrase cards will focus on the recognition of the high frequency words that these students would come across when reading appropriate-leveled text. Modeling fluency will also be covered during guided reading. A computer-based program called “Ticket To Read” will also be implemented. This program gives students extra practice with phonics skills, ultimately improving their blending skills. These instructional strategies will all support an increase in fluency in my students.

Statement of the Problem

What is the impact of implementing daily practice of Dolch sight words, phrase cards, and Ticket-to-Read on first graders’ reading fluency?

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is there will be no difference in the reading fluency of students who participate in the reading fluency intervention and those who do not.

Operational Definitions

Reading fluency is the ability to read a specific text accurately, at a solid speed, and with expression.

Intervention **is defined as** various supports put in place to assist struggling learners; this includes Dolch sight word flashcards, common phrases flashcards, and Ticket-to-Read computer program

Fountas and Pinnell, developed by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, is a leveled reading system used in primary and intermediate classrooms to determine students' reading abilities such as fluency and comprehension.

Dolch sight words are 315 commonly used words that are divided by grade level from pre-kindergarten to third grade

Phrase cards **are** cards that consist of commonly used phrases that are used in primary texts (ex: "she said that" and "you and I")

Ticket-to-Read is a self-paced computer game where kids can practice reading skills.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of literature focuses on three major components regarding reading fluency. The first section discusses the definition of reading fluency and the general process by which a child learns to read and how it relates to fluency. The second section explains the importance of teaching fluency in daily reading instruction and what benefits result from implementing this instruction. Various instructional reading strategies and programs for improving reading instruction are explained in section three. All three sections are in relation to the elementary level.

Definition of Fluency

Fluency is defined as students' ability to read written language naturally and accurately. Fluent reading is reading in which words are read quickly, accurately, and with expression by being recognized automatically (Nunez, 2009). In fact, students who demonstrate a high level of reading proficiency read with a sense of feeling, anticipation, or characterization in their reading . Fluency has two essential components: automaticity and prosody. Automaticity refers to the ability to recognize words automatically or effortlessly. Prosody completes the bridge by connecting to comprehension (Rasinski, 2012). Comprehension is important to take into consideration when determining a student's fluency score. Typically, students with high fluency rates have higher levels of reading proficiencies in reading comprehension.

Learning to read is very complex. Understanding printed language involves knowledge of decoding, vocabulary, text structure, sight words, comprehension strategies, fluency, and more (Stahl & Yaden, 2004). There are many levels that a student must master before moving on to a more difficult skill. First, student develop the identification of the letters of the alphabet. They

learn each letter's characteristics so that they are able to distinguish between them. Once students are able to identify the letters, they begin to associate the sound that corresponds to each letter, ultimately demonstrating their understanding of the connection between the letters and the sounds they make. These are the beginning stages of developing phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the ability to distinguish between individual letter sounds in written language. As young students continue to practice these skills, they become more automatic and accurate, which will allow them to unconsciously store and retrieve letter-sound relationship held in memory while simultaneously blending the sounds together to form words (Slee, 2008). Students will then use those words to form phrases and sentences in meaningful ways. Students with a solid understanding of these skills are typically considered fluent readers.

Reading fluency has become more recognized as a key element in successful reading programs in the primary grades (Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). According to Rasinski et al., fluency is a skill that should be mastered as early as possible. Fluency in reading instruction has been set on the back burner as other important reading skills have taken the front seat. Fortunately, fluency is becoming more prevalent in daily reading instruction, especially in the primary grades.

The Importance of Implementing Fluency in to Reading Instruction

Fluency researchers have examined the validity of teaching fluency and how much it improves reading achievement (Slee, 2008). Fluency is an essential skill that connects automaticity and comprehension in order for students to process meaning (Johnson, 2011). Additionally, Johnson states that because of the need for students to achieve the complex processes involved in reading, educators should teach and practice fluency and automaticity skills, such as reading speed and word recognition skills, to improve reading comprehension.

Research on evidence-based practices in beginning reading has concluded that beginning reading instruction should be composed of certain key instructional components with one of those components being fluency (Slee, 2008). In order for a child to be fluent, he or she must be a master at decoding. Slee states that decoding is the process of automatically recognizing individual graphemes (letter or letter combinations that make up a sound) that form words. In order for a student to get to the point where decoding becomes effortless and automatic, it requires hard work and much practice. Teachers in the classroom need to ensure that an adequate amount of instruction is dedicated to modeling and teaching phonics so students' decoding skills develop.

Addressing difficulties in oral reading fluency is especially important because reading fluency affects comprehension (Williams, 2011). Williams states that once a student develops the ability to sound out words, he or she can build his or her fluency or the efficiency with which he or she reads text, and from there, he or she builds his or her vocabulary so that he or she is comprehending what he or she is reading. Being able to fluidly read material makes it easier for a student to comprehend what he or she is reading since little effort is being used to sound out words. Students who have a low fluency rate often need to devote their cognitive effort to decoding sounds as they read, thus not comprehending the text (Bowling, 2011). Reading comprehension illustrates the mastery of other reading skills, such as fluency and vocabulary, and demonstrates an individual's ability to understand material across a variety of domains.

It is important to note that although fluency is thought to be taught in the primary grades, it should also be taught in the intermediate grades, middle school, and continued through high school. Poor fluency can lead to literacy problems later in a student's education (Harrison, 2011). A growing number of studies are demonstrating that fluency is a major concern for

students in intermediate grades (Rasinski, 2012). Rasinski explains that these students have trouble understanding what they read because they have significant difficulty recognizing the words they encounter in their reading and reading with appropriate phrasing and expression. These students will unfortunately experience frustration, which could then carry over into middle and high school when assessments get longer in length and timed. Older-aged students who lack fluency would need more time to complete various assessments due to the lack of automaticity. This is why it is crucial to continue to implement fluency in to reading instruction in all grade levels. The following sections suggests various instructional reading strategies that can used effectively in the primary and intermediate grades. These strategies can also be used in the middle and high school classrooms.

Instructional Reading Strategies to Improve Fluency in the Classroom

There are many different instructional reading strategies that teachers can implement in reading instruction to strengthen and reinforce fluency. The first instructional strategy, which could arguably be the most crucial, is modeling. It is important for teachers to model fluency and discuss with students what it means to read at an appropriate rate and with expression. Students benefit from solid models (Cahill & Gregory, 2011). Without modeling, students will not have an example of what reading fluently sounds like.

Another instructional strategy is guided practice or small-group reading. Developing readers increase their reading fluency when they are provided prompt assistance by a more capable and more fluent reader who reads with them (Cahill & Gregory, 2011). Paired reading and choral reading are different examples of guided practice that a student and teacher can do in a whole group or small group setting. Cahill and Gregory explain that the combination of seeing

the words while hearing them pronounced leads developing readers to improved and more expressive recognition of the words in text.

Repeating reading, also known as deep reading, is an additional instructional reading strategy to improve fluency. In fact, Cahill and Gregory (2011) state that repeated readings have been shown to be the most effective strategy for developing fluency. Research shows that as students engage in repeated readings, they not only improve their ability to read the text practiced but also demonstrate improvement in overall reading achievement. When participating in repeated readings, it is important to point out that students should be reading text that is at their instructional or independent reading level. If students are attempting to read a text at their frustration level, then it is not possible for them to practice fluency as the text is too difficult. Although considered the most effective, repeated readings can unfortunately be boring, which can lead to lack of engagement from students. However, teachers can make it more fun and engaging by practicing for a performance. Some examples include Readers' Theatre scripts, monologues and dialogues, poetry and rhymes, song lyrics, speeches and notable quotations, and finally, jokes and riddles. These examples will ensure that students are practicing fluency in an enjoyable and engaging way.

Summary

The primary purpose of reading is to gain meaning from various texts. Important for this purpose is that recognition of text becomes a fluent process (Wise et al., 2010). As students improve fluency, their reading becomes more meaningful and purposeful. Students are able to fully comprehend text and successfully demonstrate their understanding of what they have read. In order for a student to become fluent, that student needs to master decoding. This skill is

introduced in the primary grades and should be reinforced throughout a student's educational career.

No matter what grade level, there are numerous instructional strategies that can be implemented in reading instruction that will aid in the improvement of reading fluency. First and foremost, reading fluency needs to be modeled for students. Guided practice in a small-group setting is also crucial in the development of fluency. Additionally, repeated reading is another example of an effective instructional strategy. It is essential for teachers to make repeated reading more engaging since it can be quite dull. There are many different types of repeated reading that can be more appealing to students, such as choral reading, Readers' Theater, and reciting song lyrics and poems.

Reading is the gateway to learning. If students are struggling to read at a fluent rate, then their understanding and comprehension of what they are reading diminishes. This can affect learning across all content areas and grade levels. It is important that educators recognize the importance of teaching fluency and implementing various instructional reading strategies into their classrooms.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of implementing daily practice of Dolch sight words, phrase cards, and Ticket-to-Read on first graders' reading fluency

Design

The study uses a quasi-experimental design, using a pre- and post-test design. The pre- and post-test was Fountas and Pinnell. Student scores on fluency were analyzed. A student can earn a fluency score of 0, 1, 2, or 3 – with 3 being fluent. Those students who earned a fluency score of 0, 1, or 2 were selected to partake in group one. This specific group consisted of nine students. Most of these nine students, who have lower fluency scores, also struggled with comprehension. These nine students participated in various intervention strategies to improve their fluency scores, thus ultimately improving comprehension. A second group of nine students did not receive the intervention strategies. The second group of nine students consisted of the higher readers with fluency scores of 2 or 3 and demonstrate strong comprehension skills. The reason behind this grouping is to see if these students can maintain or improve their fluency skills just by guided reading alone.

Subjects

The school used for this research is located in Anne Arundel County in a suburban area. The school has approximately 670 students within grades Kindergarten through 5th grade. This school has a diverse group of students with many of students coming from military families. The majority of students come from middle to middle-upper class families. Families in this area are very pro-active and supportive when it comes to their child(ren)'s successes. This school is an

“Excellence in Gifted and Talented Education” (EGATE) school, which is a title a school receives that is supporting the Gifted and Talented student population.

Instrumentation

For this study, Fountas and Pinnell reading levels was used to measure student achievement in fluency. The researcher used this reading system for both the pre- and post-test. As stated prior, lower fluency scores typically mean lower comprehension scores. This reading system will also be used to measure comprehension scores.

Procedure

First, students’ Fountas and Pinnell scores were analyzed and these were used to determine who would participate in this project. Eighteen students were selected. Out of the 18 students, 9 students (Group One) are those who scored a fluency score of 0,1 or 2. They received extra support through the use of various intervention strategies to help improve their fluency scores. Their comprehension scores were also analyzed since comprehension and fluency go hand-in-hand. The remaining 9 students (Group Two) are those who scored a 2 or 3 in fluency. Both groups have students with fluency scores of 2; however, those students in Group One are reading just at or below grade level whereas those in Group Two are reading at or above grade level. Students in Group Two also demonstrate good comprehension skills.

After students were selected, the researcher immediately began implementing intervention strategies to Group One. The intervention strategies included Dolch sight word cards, phrase cards, and the Ticket-to-Read computer program. Dolch sight word flashcards are simply sight words written on index cards. Phrase cards are similar, except these flashcards included typical phrases students would come across while reading grade-level texts. Finally, Ticket-to-Read is a computer program that allows students to practice phonics skills. Students

alternate sight word and phrase card flashcards practice each day. They spend about five to ten minutes quizzing themselves. Once they master their set of cards – both sight and phrase cards- new sight words and phrase cards are given. Ticket-to-Read is given as a center three days a week during guided reading rotations. Group Two did not receive any intervention strategies over the course of this project.

Throughout this project, the researcher closely monitored all 18 students to informally assess where they were using leveled readers during guided reading. Ultimately, at the end of the 10-week period, the researcher administered the post-test by testing each student using the Fountas and Pinnell reading system.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to see if the implementation of interventions impacted first graders' fluency scores. The interventions used consisted of daily exposure to Dolch sight words, phrase cards, and Ticket-to-Read computer reading program.

The pre-test and post-test results of first graders who received the intervention in reading were compared to the results of a second group that did not receive the intervention using a t-test for independent groups. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Pre- and Post-test Results for First Graders Receiving or not Receiving a Reading Intervention

Test	Group	Mean	N	Standard Deviation	t-test	Significance
Pretest	Intervention	1.7	9	0.50	3.21	0.005*
	No Intervention	2.4	9	0.53		
Posttest	Intervention	2.4	9	0.53	3.16	0.013*
	No Intervention	3.0	9	0.00		

$p < 0.013$

The hypothesis that the first graders receiving the reading invention would not improve in their fluency scores is rejected.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The two groups were formed based on their fluency scores using Fountas and Pinnell. First grade students who received a fluency score of 0, 1, or 2 were selected to participate in the first group and received reading intervention. The second group of first grade students consisted of students who received a fluency score of 2 or 3 on Fountas and Pinnell. Although some students received a fluency score of 2, they were reading at or above grade level. After administering the pre-test, the mean of the intervention group was a score of 1.7. The mean of the non-intervention group was significantly higher in both pre-test, 2.4, and posttest, 3.0. On the post-test, the intervention group scored a means of 2.4, thus improving their fluency scores. While the groups were not equivalent before the study, the intervention group, while still significantly lower than the non-intervention group, was closer to it after receiving the intervention.

Implications

The results clearly show the effectiveness of the reading intervention. The teacher noticed early on that students in the intervention group needed practice with sight words, basic phrases, and blending unfamiliar words. If these skills improved, then so would their fluency scores. This realization and then implementation of these skills provided evidence that the students receiving the intervention showed the most improvement from pre-test to post-test. These students still participate in practice of sight words and phonics skills using “Ticket-to-Read” to further strengthen and maintain fluency.

Threats to Validity

Three factors could have posed threats or influenced the results: the environment, time of day, and at-home support. Some students tested in a room where it was silent and one-on-one with their teacher, while some students tested in the classroom with their entire class working quietly in the background, making the environment an issue. Some students tested earlier in the morning whereas some tested in the afternoon. Additionally, some of these students have active parent involvement while some do not have it that way.

Other than these three conditions, little else that could have influenced the results. Fountas and Pinnell is a test that these students have been exposed to before – twice in Kindergarten and once already in this grade – so this is not unfamiliar or new to them.

Relate to Studies

When deciding which interventions to use, the researcher remembered reading in a study that for a student to be fluent, he or she must be a master at decoding (Slee, 2008). If a student doesn't have strong phonics skills and struggles to blend unfamiliar words at an appropriate rate, then their fluency is negatively affected. The researcher noticed this was common amongst students who were selected to participate in the group with interventions. In order to support active engagement while strengthening phonics skills, the researcher chose "Ticket-to-Read" as one of the interventions. Automaticity is another important factor when determining a student's fluency rate. Automaticity refers to the ability to recognize words automatically and effortlessly (Rasinski et al., 2009). Again, the researcher noticed that most students struggled with recognizing sight words and common phrases within texts. This is why the researcher decided to implement daily practice with sight words and common phrases. If both of these factors, automaticity and decoding, improved, then fluency rates would improve as well.

Typically students with higher fluency rates have high levels of reading proficiencies in reading comprehension. Although not measured in this study, the researcher noticed that most students who improved their fluency scores, whether in the group who received intervention or not, improved their comprehension scores as well. Being able to fluently read various texts makes it easier for a student to comprehend because little effort is being used to sound out or try to recognize words. Once students became proficient in recognizing sight words and common phrases, as well as strengthen phonics skills, they focus more cognitive effort on the meaning of what they are reading (Bowling, 2011).

Changes and Questions

Fluency is somewhat difficult to measure because some could argue the scores are subjective – at least when using Fountas and Pinnell. Although each score is summarized clearly, scores may vary depending on the teacher. This has been a concern throughout the researcher's school because what one teacher may think is a fluency of 2, another may think is a 3. The researcher is very confident in my scoring abilities, but to be as specific and precise as possible, the researcher would focus on improving accuracy rather than fluency in general. This can be clearly measured with clear-cut results. Regardless, the researcher would still keep the intervention implemented originally since each would be of great support to improving accuracy scores.

The researcher is curious to see just how much at-home support really influences fluency scores or reading scores in general. Many would argue at-home support is crucial, but how much would students really improve in the same amount time as this study? Is daily intervention enough to improve scores or does adding at-home support increase the results significantly? Being a primary teacher, the researcher has seen just how important it is for students to be

supported at home. Future studies could use parent and student surveys to provide answers to these continued questions.

After completing this study, the researcher had a realization. Since this has significantly helped students' fluency scores, the strategies need to be implemented with all my students. If the researcher had implemented this earlier in the year, students could have improved sooner, thus growing more in their reading abilities. Fluency is complex, but the foundation of fluency involves strong phonics skills and sight word recognition. Next year, the researcher will begin implementing daily practice of sight words and phrase flash cards into guided reading to ensure success in my students' reading abilities as early as possible.

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