

Oral Fluency and Comprehension

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Abstract

This case study examined the disparity between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. The driving question for the research considered whether or not oral fluency rates on a particular reading level coincided with a thorough comprehension, measured by the subjects' ability to identify main idea and provide details. Two fourth grade students were assessed using three timed grade-level passages to determine their appropriate reading level, and later, asked to read a passage before identifying a main idea and details from the story. These results, in addition to the students' responses to in-depth questions about the text, were analyzed to determine if the selected reading level aligned with their comprehension ability. As predicted, a higher level of reading fluency did not definitively result in a comprehensive understanding of the passage, with main idea and inference as the most notable challenges.

I. Brief Background and Reason for Project Focus

The capability to read fluidly while utilizing techniques for comprehension is a skill that all students must have in order to be successful in today's competitive global society. Fluency is commonly addressed and emphasized in early education, but sometimes a struggle with comprehension of more complex texts emerges later despite the ability to read with accuracy. Upon testing a group of second, fourth and sixth grade students in fluency, a study conducted by Valencia, Smith et al. (2010) found that

50% of the students who fell below the WCPM benchmark did not need additional instruction in either rate or accuracy, which are the two variables included in WCPM oral reading scores; rather, these students needed comprehension instruction" (Valencia, 2011, p. 398).

In recent years, I have had many adept readers who had difficulty identifying and recalling the main idea and supporting details in an array of literature. As a result, I have chosen to focus my lesson on the discrepancy that exists between fluency and reading comprehension. More specifically, I will focus on recalling details of given texts.

II. Home and Family

For this study, I selected two struggling readers from my fourth grade classroom. Sarah is a ten-year-old female who was born here in Chicago, but whose family emigrated here from Ethiopia thirteen years ago. Oral reading assessments determined by Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM), a program to monitor progress in reading, placed Sarah right at an average fourth grade reading level. Both of her parents are Ethiopian, but she primarily lives with only her mother. Sarah's father is around

infrequently, so information about him, or his background, was not disclosed while her mother is a high school graduate who works from home as a seamstress.

Sarah has no difficulty speaking and understanding English, however her mom has a thick accent and often struggles to understand me when we communicate. She is most comfortable with her native language, Amharic, especially when speaking to friends and family. Sarah has a slight speech impediment that seems to have increased in severity over the course of the year, and because our Catholic school serves very low-income families, we do not have the necessary specialist to work with her, and attempts to refer her to the local public school for supplementary services have gone unanswered.

Sarah receives Title I instruction, which is a federally funded program to support at-risk students in low-income schools, for forty minutes daily with nine other fourth grade students who are performing below grade level. This service is taught by a general education teacher, and Sarah's mother has expressed concern that she is unable, or unsure, how to assist her with homework and therefore they have little interaction at home besides assuring all work has been completed. They will occasionally read bedtime stories together, and Sarah's older sister, whom I taught two years ago, will occasionally help her with her homework.

Daniel is a ten-year-old male who was also born in Chicago and whose parents emigrated from Ethiopia. Both of his parents are high school graduates; his father works as a cab driver in Chicago, and his mother is a parking attendant. When assessed only in fluency, Daniel performs at an average fourth grade reading level, but on summative assessments, or assignments testing comprehension, he struggles immensely. On the

most recent state standardized test (TerraNova), Daniel scored a 35% in reading and a 25% in language. His family speaks English in the home, but occasionally will speak in Tigrinya with the grandfather who has no English fluency. Like Sarah, Daniel receives daily Title I instruction for forty minutes, but has shown little improvement. If we had the resources, I would recommend him for Tier 3 intervention, the most intensive form of instruction in the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, which serves students who aren't responding to the initial remediation provided in Tier 1 and Tier 2, as I think Daniel would greatly benefit from the small-group instruction. Both Daniel and his parents have shared with me that there is no commitment to literacy in the home, and when Daniel does read at home, it is always independently.

III. Emotional Climate

At the beginning of fourth grade, Sarah was extremely timid with all literacy-related activities and frequently requested that she not be called on to offer her ideas or to read aloud. While she has made some improvement, she still lacks confidence in front of her peers, especially when asked to defend her beliefs, as she feels others will “judge or make fun of her.” Sarah’s greatest challenge comes with writing, and she expresses an extreme dislike for all writing assignments. She struggles with spelling, punctuation and grammar, and requires a great deal of teacher assistance to create a cohesive paragraph. This difficulty has led to her refusal to share her writing in front of the class and an overwhelming disinterest and lack of effort whenever she’s assigned a new task.

Though Daniel generally lacks motivation, he is fairly confident in his ability to read aloud and will often share his ideas when he is fully engaged and interested in the subject matter. If he receives a poor grade on an assignment, however, he will call himself “dumb,” which will negatively influence his motivation and behavior, as he retreats to acting like the class clown, something he’s comfortable and familiar with, but that is very bothersome to the other students. As a result, his time spent in each grade with almost all the same students has not helped Daniel’s reputation or self-esteem. If Daniel is assigned a task that seems too challenging for him, he usually either rushes through with little effort or shuts down completely, laying on his desk and refusing to work. Despite this, his overall perception of reading and writing remains quite positive, and with consistent encouragement, Daniel enjoys school and can perform well.

IV. Literacy History

Sarah’s mom is a high school graduate and, as mentioned above, feels uncertain in her ability to offer assistance to Sarah due to the language barrier. As a result, there is little academic support at home; however, the importance of education is regularly emphasized. Sarah’s school history with literacy has been a struggle since kindergarten, and she’s received daily small group instruction ever since. Her sensitivity and lack of confidence is best served through frequent positive reinforcement as well as a commitment to one-on-one instruction from her teachers.

Daniel’s parents, and especially his mom, want to be involved in their children’s education and regularly communicate with their teachers. Additionally, all of the children are enrolled in supplemental after-school programs to improve their math and literacy

skills. While Daniel's mom elicits suggestions for providing support at home, she often claims there was not time to implement them, and therefore, Daniel infrequently receives the necessary assistance to adequately complete his homework or projects. Like Sarah, Daniel has struggled with literacy since kindergarten and is also receiving small group instruction to improve his skills.

V. Tests Given and Summary of Test Results

Daniel and Sarah were each initially tested in fluency using three randomly selected fourth grade narrative passages to assess their WCPM (words correct per minute). Students were timed for one minute as they read, while I listened and marked errors and missed words. (See examples in Appendices A-F). Following each passage, I asked Daniel and Sarah to provide me with a very brief description of the main idea. Responses can be seen at the bottom of the examples in Appendices A-F. This pre-test was given as a way to assess fluency and reading level, as well as determine whether or not comprehension was occurring, and if it aligned with their reading level.

The post-test which was given ten days later on May 31, 2013 followed a similar format, but focused less on reading rate and required more autonomy and detail from each student. Again, Daniel and Sarah individually read passages aloud, but the emphasis was on both oral fluency and comprehension. For this assessment, I used a reading passage of an excerpt from *No More Magic* by Avi, which is a Level R reading (see Appendix K).¹ Prior to reading, students are told that after they finish the passage, they will need to provide a retell, or summary, of what they have just read. If students

¹ Copies of this passage, in addition to others at all levels, can also be found at <http://readingandwritingproject.com/resources/assessments/reading-assessments.html>.

did not address particular questions that accompany the reading, I had them answer those on paper and observed. (See Appendices L & M) The last part of this assessment was to use their knowledge of the readings, combined with the questions they answered, to fill in a graphic organizer and write a brief summary detailing the main idea of the story. In doing this, I was hoping to find that both Daniel and Sarah had a solid understanding of what they had read, could identify a main idea and could support it with details from the story.

Pre-test

According to Fountas and Pinnell (2009), fourth grade students should be reading between 120 and 160 WPM. Daniel's fluency was determined by three passages. On the first passage, Daniel read 157 words per minute (WPM) without any errors. On the second passage, Daniel read 139 WPM, but made two errors for a total of 137 WCPM. For the last passage, he read 134 WPM with no errors. His average for all three passages was 143 WPM, which places him in the middle of the fourth grade range. In retelling, however, Daniel struggled more, and described only a couple of details he could recall, indicating a lack in understanding of main idea.

Sarah read the same three passages and while her average WPM was much higher than Daniel's, the speed at which she read prevented any sort of expression and appropriate pauses for punctuation. On the first passage, Sarah read 178 WPM, but made six errors for a total of 172 WCPM. On the second passage, Sarah read 189 WPM, but again, made six errors for a total of 183 WCPM. On the final passage, she read 186 WPM with ten errors for a total of 176 WCPM. These passages demonstrated an average fluency level of 177 WPM, placing Sarah well beyond the top of the range

for fourth grade reading level. Like Daniel, Sarah also had some difficulty providing a main idea, giving little details and opinions that weren't well-founded. Sarah's discrepancy between reading rate and recall aligns with the fluency research by Rasinski and Samuels (2011):

The correlation between reading rate and reading comprehension, as well as the ease and quickness with which reading rate can be determined, has led to the development of fluency instruction programs that focus primarily on increasing reading speed, with minimal attention given to prosody or comprehension. This overemphasis on reading rate has led students to think of proficient reading as fast reading (p. 97).

This pre-assessment helped in guiding the lesson for my students, and, considering their success strictly in oral fluency, I chose to select a level S reading for the lesson, which according to Fountas and Pinnell (2012), is considered the level to meet expectations at the end of fourth grade.

Post-test

For the post-assessment, Daniel and Sarah followed a format similar to the taught lesson, but with greater independence and individually. Bearing in mind the difficulty each student encountered with the level S reading when provided scaffolding, I chose to use a level R (see Appendix K) for the final assessment to more appropriately match their reading level for both oral fluency *and* comprehension, thus increasing their chance for success. As expected, Daniel and Sarah read the passage fluently, only making minor errors, including word substitutions and mispronunciations, though they almost always self-corrected. After reading, both students were asked to give an oral

summary of the passage, and if they failed to include the literal or comprehension questions included in the follow-up, (see Appendices L & M) I then had them answer those questions on paper as well.

While it was clear that both Sarah and Daniel understood the story in their retell of the passage, I asked both to complete the questions, as neither delved into them explicitly enough. Of the four questions, Daniel answered three correctly. Sarah also answered three correctly and, while her answer to question two was not the anticipated response, she justified it using a text-to-self connection, which made it acceptable. (See Appendix M)

The last component of the final assessment was to use a graphic organizer to fill in the main idea and three supporting details, and then use this to write a final summary of the passage. Daniel did an excellent job, and, without prompting, came up with the main idea of a boy looking for his stolen bike. (See Appendix N) His three supporting details helped him to write a cohesive summary that included a beginning, middle, and end, and touched on only the important details. (See Appendix O) On the other hand, Sarah's summary focused on one small part of the story, that the boy is feeling depressed about his bike being stolen. (See Appendix P) While her details do support her main idea, she's only providing a retell of the very first part of the story and fails to include the climax. (See Appendix Q)

In determining a final assessment score, I used the questions included with the reading passages obtained from The Teacher's College Reading and Writing Project (2010):

1. Was the reader's accuracy rate at least 96%?

2. Did the student read with fluency?
3. Did the reader correctly answer at least 3 questions in the Comprehension Questions Section?
4. Did the retelling/summary express the important things that happened in the text?

For Daniel, I could answer all four questions with a yes, meaning this is an appropriate level for him for both fluency *and* comprehension. While Sarah’s fluency is higher than Daniel’s, she struggled more with comprehension. I think this is still a comfortably challenging reading level for Sarah, but I could not answer yes to all of the above questions, as her summary did not address the main idea of the story.

Additionally, it was apparent in both the lesson and the post-assessment that Daniel and Sarah struggle most with inference questions, which would be a skill I would address in later lessons.

VI. Lesson Plan Matrix

Lesson Foci/Date	Objectives (include including performance, conditions, and criterion. State the <i>Common Core State Standard</i> at the end of each objective.	Instructional materials (what will use to deliver the main objectives of the lesson)	On-going assessment (to measure attainment of objectives)
Oral Reading Fluency Assessments (5/21/13)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CC.ELA.4.RF.3 Students will know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words. 2. CC.ELA.4.RF.4 Students will read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension. 3. CC.ELA.4.RF.4a Students 	aimsweb & Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM) Passages for Oral Reading – Grade 4	Use average of three passages to determine WPM for each student. Ask for a brief summary of each passage to indicate level of comprehension. Mark passages with mistakes, self-

<p>Reading for Comprehension (Main Idea, Details and Inference) (5/29/13)</p> <p>With Graphic Organizer and Written Summary (5/31/13)</p>	<p>will read grade-level text with purpose and understanding.</p> <p>4. CC.ELA.4.RF.4c Students will use context clues to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.</p> <p>5. CC.ELA.4.RL.1 Students will refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text</p> <p>6. CC.ELA.4.RI.2 Students will determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.</p>	<p>Teacher's College Reading & Writing Project for Reading Assessments link</p> <p><i>Taking Care of Terrific</i> by Lois Lowry, pp. 1-2 (Set 2, Level S)</p> <p><i>No More Magic</i> by Avi, pp. 20-22 (Set 2, Level R)</p> <p>Graphic Organizer</p>	<p>corrects, etc.</p> <p>Working together, answer questions and retell main idea of passage. Assess fluency and comprehension. Determine appropriateness of reading level based on observation and ability.</p> <p>Independently read, retell and answer questions. Assess ability without assistance.</p> <p>Use graphic organizer to fill in main idea and supporting details. Use that information to write a cohesive summary that addresses main idea of story. Once again, assess if students are at an appropriate reading level and can</p>
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			perform all objectives independently.
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VII. Reflections on My Differentiated Lesson Plans

I opted to focus my lesson on oral fluency and comprehension with Daniel and Sarah after observing their ability to read aloud successfully and comparing that to their apparent struggle with comprehension, as was evident with both standardized test results and classroom reading activities. While fluency is an important skill, Rasinski and Samuels (2011) point out, “Without commensurate attention to prosody and comprehension, reading fluency is an empty vessel” (p. 96). The intention of the lesson (Appendix R), and purpose of including the comprehension component, was to challenge the notion that fast reading can always be equated to skilled, grade-level reading.

I was initially discouraged by the fact that I had to “drop” a reading level for the post-assessment after witnessing and reflecting upon the apparent struggle Daniel and Sarah had in reaching the main idea of the Level S passage, *Taking Care of Terrific*. It was evident in both their written responses to the questions, and in the conversation that followed, (see Appendix H for transcript) that the story required too much inference for their reading abilities. Further, the difficulty in identifying what was not explicitly stated in the story gave way to ideas that were imaginative and not grounded in the literature. This is highlighted in Daniel’s response to question two (see Appendix I), to which he responds that that the plant can be compared to an animal and then later, in conversation, specifies a monkey. Question four was also a struggle for both Sarah and Daniel, (Appendices I & J) even when I provided questions to help them relate to the

character. Sarah frequently indicates that Enid feels “encouraged” by her mother, which is clearly the opposite of how she feels, but again, this higher-level question required an ability to infer. Daniel seems to understand that there is some resentment in the relationship between mother and daughter, but he infers that it is because the mother is “overreacting to the plant.” Their struggle with this particular story presented me with a critical decision for the direction of the lesson. Given that the post-assessment would require more autonomy and writing skill, in addition to less prompting from me, was this an appropriate reading level for these students? Duke, Pearson, Strachan & Billman (2011) make reference to the importance of teacher flexibility with regards to gradual release for students encountering difficult texts or concepts explaining, “The point for teachers is to get used to sliding up and down that release continuum as circumstances demand” (p. 67). Bearing that in mind, I chose to select a Level R passage for the post-assessment to increase the chance for success once scaffolding was eliminated.

Despite the difficulty with some aspects of the story, I do believe the conversation that followed the reading and written response part of the lesson was quite helpful to the students, as neither enjoys writing activities, and it’s clear in the transcript of the conversation that they each had a lot more to say. I also think it was beneficial for Sarah and Daniel to work together and hear one another’s ideas, as it offered an opportunity to gain another perspective and experience a sense of collaboration, a technique teachers can utilize to instill motivation in the students (Guthrie, 2011). I would definitely utilize this approach again in the general classroom, and have students work in small groups while making myself available to assist struggling readers.

For the assessment, it was clear that the decision to use Level R story *No More Magic* by Avi (see Appendix K) aided the students in reaching my instructional goals. Both Daniel and Sarah encountered far more success and exhibited more comfort and confidence in their independent assessments. The answers they provided to three out of four written responses, including two of which were inferential, indicated a better understanding of the story. Question three, however, which was also an inferential question, proved to be more challenging (see Appendices L & M), as they were unable to pick up on the sarcasm delivered by Chris's dad.

For the second part of the assessment, I asked the students to utilize a graphic organizer in order to help them write a summary of the passage. This is an important skill I use frequently, as "Transforming a piece of text into a graphic organizer and visual form requires that students reread and engage in critical thinking about what they read" (Fisher & Fray, 2011, p. 350). Daniel's success with this task proved he had conquered all of my goals for this lesson; he identified the main idea, provided three supporting details, and constructed an organized summary paragraph. (See Appendix O) In contrast, Sarah, though she did complete the assessment, focused on one detail of the story – that the boy (Chris) was depressed about his lost bike, and wrote her summary solely about that part of the story. (See Appendix Q)

If I was to teach this lesson again, there are a couple ways I would change the format. First, I would rely on the students' interests and life experiences to select a piece of literature that's relatable and engaging. "When students read on the topic of reported interest to them, whether working animals or robotics, they employed a greater number and range of comprehension processes" (Duke et al., 2011, p. 61). This may

have increased their attention to details and produced better results on the reading used for the lesson. Additionally, for future lessons, I would offer the students' choice in the selected readings, as well as the method for reaching the instructional goals. Guthrie (2011) identifies offering choices as a major role in student motivation stating, "they enable students to feel a stronger sense of investment and to commit larger amounts of effort to their reading work (p. 188). These minor changes may have positively influenced the lesson I taught, and perhaps, Sarah and Daniel may have found success with a level S reading had they been implemented.

VIII. Recommendations to Teachers and Parents/Caregivers

To help Sarah and Daniel continue to improve their reading comprehension skills and overall success in the classroom, their future teachers can implement numerous strategies that have been proven successful. First, Sarah and Daniel respond well to regular positive reinforcement and thrive with a teacher who understands and supports them academically and personally. A teacher equipped to handle Sarah's sensitivity would recognize her fear of being singled out in a classroom and offer other outlets to share her ideas while she gains comfort and confidence. Daniel requires a lot of attention from his teacher and must feel a sense that he or she believes in his learning abilities; this is likely to prevent him from misbehaving, his other way of receiving attention. Additionally, Daniel and Sarah's teacher would benefit from understanding their unique life experiences and utilizing those to create lessons that are meaningful and engaging to them. Finally, I would recommend small-group instructional approach

in the classroom, student choice in literacy-related activities, and teacher scaffolding and modeling prior to assigning independent assignments.

To the Parents of Daniel and Sarah:

For Daniel and Sarah's parents, daily communication with the teacher is critical to the success of their children. Working with the teacher will ensure appropriate academic support continues at home to improve their literacy skills. Secondly, I would recommend reading together each day, rotating between reader and listener, and asking questions to check for comprehension or requesting a summary of what was read. Two websites that offer leveled readings with questions as well as suitable answers can be found at:

<http://www.k12reader.com/subject/4th-grade-reading-comprehension-worksheets/>

<http://readingandwritingproject.com/resources/assessments/reading-assessments>

Additionally, setting goals with regards to reading, and offering rewards for meeting them, would instill motivation and make growth visible and gratifying. Finally, allow your child to select books that are of interest to him or her. For Daniel, I would recommend the *39 Clues* series, which is written by a variety of authors, as it contains action and suspense, two features of stories that Daniel has indicated he thoroughly enjoys.

Considering Sarah's interest in history, I would recommend the *American Girl* books, also written by several authors. Combining these suggestions with constant support and encouragement will certainly help Daniel and Sarah in their literacy journey.

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