

## For Students Who Are Not Yet Fluent, Silent Reading Is Not the Best Use of Classroom Time

Jan Hasbrouck (2008)

After more than 20 years as the neglected goal of reading instruction (Allington, 1983; NICHD, 2000), **fluency** has finally become the hot topic among reading researchers, professional development providers, and teachers. These days it is rare to pick up a reading journal, attend a professional conference, or sit in a faculty staff room at a school without hearing someone discussing reading fluency.

Surely most every educator has heard the message that if students aren't sufficiently fluent in their reading, they won't have sufficient comprehension. Given this clear statement — supported by a strong consensus of high-quality research studies — teachers and administrators everywhere are searching for ideas to help their students become fluent readers.

As someone who has conducted research on fluency over the past two decades, I find the current buzz both promising and troubling. As I will explain, fluency is a vital reading skill, but the buzz around fluency is reaching deafening levels — and crucial details from the research are being overlooked. As a result, schools across the country are putting significant amounts of time and effort into two instructional strategies for improving fluency that the research does not support: silent reading and Round Robin Reading (RRR).

Developing fluency among struggling readers takes more intensive, carefully guided practice than either of these strategies can deliver. Let's take a quick look at how these ineffective strategies became so popular and move on to an in-depth discussion of what reading fluency really is and how teachers can help their struggling students.

Marilyn Jager Adams (1990) stated in her noteworthy synthesis of reading research that "if we want children to read well, we must find a way to induce them to read lots" (p. 5). Many educators took this statement to heart and made the leap to the idea that one great way to help students do a lot of reading would be to have them read in the classroom. Methods labeled "sustained silent reading" (SSR) or "drop everything and read" (DEAR) became commonplace in schools across the country.

Some schools encouraged teachers to spend significant amounts of classroom time having the students—and often the teacher as well—read silently up to 30 minutes a day, plus an additional 15 minutes in writing personal reflections on what was read (Sierra-Perry, 1996). What some SSR and DEAR proponents may have missed is Adams's follow-up statement: "if we want to induce children to read lots, we must also teach them to read well" (1990, p. 5).

Of course, not all educators got swept up in the excitement around SSR and DEAR; some questioned if devoting this much time to unassisted, independent reading and writing could really be beneficial for all students. What about those students who struggle with basic reading skills and who may not use their silent reading time well—either wasting time by doing little to no reading or writing, or trying to read materials that cause frustration because they are too difficult?

As it turns out, such concerns are justified. The National Reading Panel\* (NRP) concluded that there is insufficient support from empirical research to suggest that independent, silent reading can be used to help students improve their fluency (NICHD, 2000). (Note that the NRP did not

say that it has no benefits, just that evidence does not suggest it improves fluency. So, if some students are fluent readers, they could read silently while the teacher works with the struggling readers.)

Instead of independent silent reading, the NRP (NICHD, 2000) concluded that teachers should provide opportunities for students to read aloud with some guidance and feedback. One way some teachers have provided this kind of oral reading practice in their classrooms is with a method that has long been used in classrooms: Round Robin Reading. RRR involves having individual students in a group take turns reading aloud from text. While RRR can be used to read narrative passages, it is also frequently employed by content area teachers who have students take turns reading aloud all or part of a chapter in a social studies or science textbook.

A common rationale for using RRR in a classroom — along with providing the oral guided reading recommended by the NRP — is that in some classes there are students who would not be able or motivated to read a literature passage or a chapter from their textbook by themselves. RRR is seen as a way for a teacher to ensure that every student is in fact reading, and if there are some difficult words or concepts, the teacher is available to provide support.

Despite the popularity and longevity of RRR, upon reflection there are clearly several downsides to using this method. Perhaps the most obvious concern is how the requirement to read aloud to classmates can put students — especially those who struggle with reading — in a position of being humiliated and demoralized by displaying their weak skills in front of their peers. Their more skilled peers may feel uncomfortable as well, and are subjected to listening to poor examples of reading. Another concern about RRR is the very minimal practice provided by this method.

If there are more than a small number of students in the group, each individual student is only reading for a very short period of time, which is clearly insufficient to make any difference in fluency. In addition, it is questionable as to whether or not the students who are not reading aloud are actually paying attention. RRR can be most accurately viewed as a way to "cover" written text, but it is difficult to justify its use given these considerable weaknesses.

Since the importance of fluency has become widely recognized, teachers have been doing their best to improve students' fluency. But, as we have just seen, sometimes the information they have to work with is incomplete and, therefore, leads them down the wrong path. Silent reading seems like a good idea since it gives students additional practice. Round Robin seems like a good idea since it focuses the class on oral reading. But increasing fluency requires more practice, more support, and more guided oral reading than either of these strategies can deliver.

#### About the author

Jan Hasbrouck is an educational consultant and researcher at Gibson Hasbrouck & Associates. She will be a speaker at CDL's 2011 Plain Talk About Reading Institute.

Reprinted with permission from the author.