

The Herts for Learning (HfL) KS2 Reading Fluency Project –

Strategies and Outcomes

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Herts for Learning (HfL) is an award-winning provider of products and services to schools and educational settings within and outside Hertfordshire. We believe that every young person, through access to a great education, should be able to realise their potential, regardless of where they live or their circumstances. Our work is focused on supporting the schools we work with to achieve successful long-term outcomes for their children. HfL is the UK’s largest School Company, operates with a not-for-profit ethos and is majority owned by Hertfordshire schools.

Working with a junior school (open to boys and girls aged 7-11) in summer 2016, and in the wake of the heightened reading expectations set by the UK government in the same year, it was clear that a small number of children in the higher year groups were struggling to comprehend age-related texts in a way that would prepare them for the demands of the reading curriculum at secondary school. This presented a conundrum for the school leaders. The school generally achieved good outcomes for pupils, and their reading curriculum and teaching approaches were based on research-informed practice. Yet, despite this, a small number of pupils were struggling. Upon listening to these pupils read and analysing their reading profiles, it was clear that despite having decoding skills broadly in line with their age-expectations, fluency was lacking. Put simply, they didn't sound good to listen to. The Key Stage 2 Reading Fluency Project was formed in response to this observation as a way of supporting poor comprehenders to improve their skills by reading texts with improved fluency. The project intends to strengthen the child's inner reading voice, thus providing them with the opportunity to read a range of texts with appropriate prosody, pace, expression and intonation so that the words on the page become capable of imparting meaning as they are read.

Following our initial ground work with a number of willing Hertfordshire schools, whereby we explored our strategies and strengthened our rationale, the HfL Reading Fluency Project launched in 2017. Over 1000 pupils have since taken part in the project and reading assessment data has been collected and analysed for 680 participants. We did not intend for this work to replicate a research study, instead we sought to offer a practical approach to solve a persistent and perplexing problem. In this blog, we share

some of the quantitative and qualitative data collected, along with some rationale behind the intervention, and the strategies used.

As outlined briefly in paragraph 1, the project was designed largely in response to teachers' growing concerns that a minority of pupils who had acquired adequate enough phonics to pass the Phonics Screening Check (undertaken aged 5 or 6) and who were assessed as age-related in reading at the end of Key Stage 1 (aged 7 or 8) were no longer on track to leave primary school with sufficient reading stamina or comprehension skills to pass the Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs) at the end of Key Stage 2 (aged 11). Not only were many of these children no longer on track to demonstrate age-relatedness through the national standard measure, but anecdotal evidence suggested that these pupils were demonstrating a general lack of reading engagement and confidence.

The problem became evident upon hearing these individuals read an age-related text. When reading aloud, many of these pupils read in a stilted and staccato manner: they sped up and slowed down with alarming unpredictability; they grouped words together in unexpected and unfamiliar patterns and conversely, they separated the flow of well-known phrases by inserting unnecessary pauses. Furthermore, in their efforts to get the ordeal (for this is how many seemed to approach it) over and done with, they would race through the text, often mispronouncing words and paying little regard to the punctuation on the page; their pace being largely dictated by how quickly they could decode a tricky word or how long they could sustain a breath, rather than by the needs of the text. In addition to this erratic pace, lack of automaticity and expression, we also noticed that this group of children lacked stamina; often their reading prowess showed quick decline when reading anything in excess of a few sentences. This was demonstrated through increased errors and a general display of fatigue.

Hearing these children read, we were fairly convinced that comprehending the text, yet alone enjoying it, had not been at the forefront of our young readers' minds. Our prediction was correct. Very few children could answer any questions about the text they had just read; even simple questions involving direct retrieval were often met by stunned silence, or, from the more teacher-pleasing child, wild and sometimes quite amusing conjecture! When an answer was offered, it was often brief and elaboration was not forthcoming.

Influenced by the work of pioneers in the field of fluency, such as Rasinski, we proposed that these children would benefit from discrete and direct fluency instruction.

Following on from a period of intense reading, team discussion and exploration, we designed an intervention which included at its core, elements of: modelled, expert prosody (expressive, phrased reading); repeat re-reading; and explicit teaching of phrasing. Our hypothesis was that if the children read texts with appropriate pace, prosody and expression, they would find them a great deal easier to understand; our additional hope was that with understanding would come greater enjoyment of the reading experience. We hoped that the children would internalise the notion that the words on the page invite the reader to bring them to life and make meaning of them.

A large part of the intervention that we formed therefore involves teachers modelling expert prosody when reading a challenging text aloud to the target pupils. But, how to provide this prosodic model for our target group in a way that they can internalise and take the skill with them to future unseen, or cold, reading tasks? Echo reading proved to be the answer and now forms the backbone of the project approach.

As part of the project, we support the focus pupil group's teacher to select eight different texts, all varied in terms of genre, style and tone yet age-related in terms of pitch or difficulty, and each week the teacher works through one text with the pupils over two sessions. Using echo reading, teachers support pupils to hear the expert prosody required to make the meaning explicit and to bring the text alive. The pupils echo a sentence, or even a clause at a time, and repeat this process throughout the passage, meaning that they have heard the text read, in their own voice, employing the expert prosody that is required to make meaning from the words on the page.

We also incorporated an element of repeat re-reading into the intervention as our reading of research convinced us of its necessity in boosting not only reading performance, but also self-esteem. We provided teachers with strategies to facilitate multiple reads and re-reads of the same passage which has first been echo-read.

The final element that we wanted to include was the teaching of phrasing. This, in our experience, is the aspect of fluency instruction which is the least widely taught or employed as a strategy in UK schools. It has proven to be absolutely vital in the project's success. We ask our teachers to teach the children how to text-mark for phrasing where perhaps there is no punctuation to guide the reader and we ask teachers to support the pupils to internalise this process and model it not only in the fluency lesson, but across the curriculum.

The initial results were startling! After only 20 minutes of modelling and echo reading, many pupils were not only sounding better to listen to, but their comprehension had improved. Suddenly, the children were not only responding to questions about the text, but they were darting back and forth across the pages locating evidence to support their responses. Beyond this, there was a sense of enjoyment. The children had actually enjoyed the reading experience. We knew at this point that we were onto something!

Now, after 10 project rounds with over 120 schools involving in excess of 1000 pupils, the outcomes for participating pupils continue to delight us. The York Assessment of Reading Comprehension (YARC) tool provides us with a pre and post intervention reading age for comprehension for project participants. On average, pupils make gains of 2 years and 3 months in their comprehension score over the 8 week intervention. In the first year of its introduction, 60% of participating pupils went onto reach the expected standard in the SATs reading paper (it's important to note that none of these pupils were deemed to be on track to meet this standard before embarking on the 8-week intervention). Qualitative evidence from teachers forms an important impact tool of the intervention; many tell us that the most important outcome from the project is that previously reluctant children are now readers! They use the word 'confidence' in virtually all feedback, and tell us that these children actively seek them out and ask when their next fluency session is taking place: "the children will now openly engage in a discussion about reading with anyone who will listen," and "[the best thing about the project was]...giving a child the confidence to read aloud at a carol concert in front of all the parents." and "Pupils absolutely loved this project and made incredible progress. For me, it was invaluable CPD that has improved the teaching of reading for all children in my class."

Every time we gather our project teachers together for their final instalment of project input, the enthusiasm is infectious and palpable.

Fluency instruction is transformational, and for our pupils and teachers, it has provided the missing key.