BUILDING FLUENCY THROUGH THE PHRASED TEXT LESSON

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Jasmine struggled greatly with the passage. Her word-by-word, staccato oral reading sounded robotic. More important, when asked to retell what she had read, she sheepishly smiled and looked down. Charles's reading was much different. He read quickly and confidently. Every word was uttered correctly as he sped through the passage. Unfortunately, he also sped through commas, periods, and other phrase boundaries that were not marked by punctuation. Unfortunately, too, his comprehension of the passage was much the same as Jasmine's.

One of the most visible features of fluent readers is their ability to read orally with appropriate expression or prosody. Features of prosodic oral reading include intonation, stress, phrasing, appropriate pausing, and phrase lengthening (Dowhower, 1987, 1991; Schrauben, 2010; Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker, & Stahl, 2004).

Researchers argue that expression or prosody in reading helps readers chunk the text they read into syntactically appropriate units (e.g., noun phrases, verb phrases, prepositional phrases) that assist them in constructing meaning (Schreiber, 1980, 1991; Schreiber & Read, 1980). Combining intonation with appropriate phrasing helps readers to comprehend what is being read (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010). Poor disfluent reading, on

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the other hand, is often characterized by oral text reading that is word by word, lacking in phrasing and lacking in expression. And, with the current emphasis on increasing students' reading speed that is an essential component of many instructional programs for fluency, disfluent reading can also be characterized by oral reading that is excessively fast, lacking in phrasing, and lacking in expression. In either case, poor comprehension is the ultimate result.

We feel that the phrase, in and of itself, is a textual unit worthy of explicit instruction. In many ways, it is the phrase and not the word that is the essential unit of meaning in a text. For example, phrasing difficulties can disrupt meaning (e.g., "The old man the boat.") or perhaps even change the intended meaning of sentences (e.g., "Let's eat Grandma," "Happily they left." "They hit the man with the cane."). Moreover, words such as *if*, *of*, and *but* have little meaning unless they are embedded in a phrase.

One of the problems with phrasing in reading is that phrase boundaries are often invisible to readers. Punctuation does offer some guidance for intersentential (between sentences) text breaks and for some intrasentential (within sentence) phrase boundaries. However, many phrase boundaries are not explicitly marked, and readers must infer the appropriate places to phrase text within sentences. For struggling readers, this additional task of inferring meaningful phrase boundaries may simply add to an already complex and laborious process.

Instruction in phrasing may be a strategy worth employing for elementary students, especially those who have yet to achieve sufficient levels of fluency in their reading. Yet, in many classrooms and reading intervention programs, instructional emphasis on reading in appropriate phrases simply does not happen. Helping struggling readers learn to read in phrases has been suggested as a way to improve fluency and overall reading proficiency (Rasinski, 1989a; 2010). Indeed, a historical review of research into helping readers learn to phrase text has reported very promising results, not only in improving reading fluency, but also other aspects of reading, including comprehension (Rasinski, 1990, 1994). More recent research continues to demonstrate both the importance of phrasing in reading and language comprehension (Frazier, Carlson, & Clifton, 2006) and that many students lack syntactic awareness and sensitivity to phrase appropriately when reading (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010; Gattorda, Stanovich, & Siegel, 1996; Leikin & Assayag-Bouskila, 2004; Mokhtari & Thompson, 2006; Rasinski, 1989b; Young & Bower, 1995). This results in poor comprehension and poor overall reading achievement. It follows, then, that instruction in phrasing may offer significant benefits across an array of reading competencies, especially for struggling readers.

The Phrased Text Lesson

One approach for helping students develop their ability to phrase texts essentially involves making visible those normally invisible phrase boundaries for students. We have noticed that public speakers, when giving a speech, will often mark phrase boundaries in the written texts of the speeches they are reading as visual cues to assist them in phrasing their oral rendition of the speech. If this benefits fluent speakers when reading a text, would it not benefit children learning to become fluent readers? We think so.

The Phrased Text Lesson is a 2-day lesson, requires about 10–15 minutes per day, and provides direct instruction in learning to read with meaningful phrasing. The Phrased Text Lesson is based on the recommendations of reading and language scholars who have recognized the efficacy of such instruction (e.g., Aulls, 1978; Dowhower, 1991; Frase & Schwartz, 1979; O'Shea & Sindelar, 1983; Rasinski, 1990). Although the lesson we present is based on phrasing lessons from previous decades (e.g., Rasinski, 1994, 2003), we feel that more recent research into the importance of phrasing in reading and language comprehension is an impetus for revisiting the importance of phrasing instruction. Here is how the Phrased Text Lesson works.

Day 1

Find a relatively short passage (100–400 words in length) from a text that students have previously read or will be reading. Try to find a passage that lends itself to expressive oral reading. Make a copy of this selection.

With a pencil, mark what you believe are the appropriate phrase boundaries in the text where reader would pause with slash marks—one slash mark for short phrase boundaries and pauses

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within sentence and two slashes for boundaries (longer pauses) between sentences. (Although there can be some subjectivity in marking phrase boundaries, we have found in our research that there is generally a high degree of consistency among proficient readers [Rasinski, 1989a].) Make a copy of each marked text for every student you are working with.

Excerpts of examples of marked text from a story, an informational passage, and a poem are provided in the Figure. Present the marked text to students, explaining the importance of phrasing and the nature of the slash marks to students.

1. First, read the text to students while having them follow along silently. Provide extra emphasis on your own phrasing of the text. Discuss the content of the passage, how you were able to convey meaning through your appropriate phrasing, and how you used your voice and appropriate pausing to mark the phrase boundaries in your speech.
2. Then, chorally read the passage with your students, again placing emphasis on expressive and phrased reading.
3. Next, have students practice the passage on their own. Students could read the passage individually in a low voice (mumble reading) once or twice. Or they could read with a partner, with each student reading the text once while the other follows along silently and gives formative feedback to the partner.
4. Finally, have selected students individually, in pairs, or in small groups read the passage as a performance for the other students. Provide students with positive and formative feedback to the reading. This completes the lesson for the first day of instruction.

Figure Examples of Marked Text

Story: From *Seven Brave Women* by Betsy Hearne

My grandmother did great things. // Betty lived during World War II / but she did not fight in it. // She took fencing for fun / and played basketball / on the first girls' team in her state / and went to France / to take harp lessons / from a famous harpist there. //

Informational Passage: From *Smokejumpers: Battling the Forest Flames* by Diana Briscoe

In 1918, / Henry A. Graves had a bright idea. // The head of the U. S. Forest Service asked the Army Air Service / if he could borrow some planes and pilots. // He want to make air patrols / to spot fires / from the air. //

Poem: "You Are Old, Father William" by Lewis Carroll

"You are old, / Father William," / the young man said, /
"And your hair has become very white; //
And yet you incessantly / stand on your head /
Do you think, / at your age, / it is right?" //

"In my youth," / Father William replied / to his son,
"I feared it might / injure the brain; //
But, / now that I'm perfectly sure / I have none,
Why, / I do it / again and again." //

"You are old," / said the youth," / as I mentioned before, /
And have grown / most uncommonly fat; //
Yet you turned a back somersault / in at the door /
Pray, / what is the reason / of that?" //

Day 2

Provide a copy of the text *without the phrase boundaries explicitly marked* for each student in your group. Go through the same routine as in Day 1. Without the marked phrase boundaries, students will have to apply what they learned from Day 1 to a text that is a more conventional format.

As students develop a greater awareness of the how phrases carry meaning, they can be asked to mark phrase boundaries themselves in subsequent passages. In this text phrasing activity, students must determine how a text's meaning is carried through individual phrases.

Other Elements of Fluency Instruction

The Phrased Text Lesson is a simple and quick lesson that focuses children's attention on the importance of appropriate and meaningful phrasing when reading orally as well as in silent reading. Using the lesson once or twice a week over the course of several weeks will help many struggling readers move from the choppy word-by-word reading that characterizes disfluent reading to reading that is appropriately phrased and meaningful.

In addition to focusing on phrase boundaries, the lesson incorporates other elements of effective fluency instruction (Rasinski, 2010)—modeling fluent reading for students, assisted reading (choral reading), and repeated reading of one text. Indeed, we must note that the Phrased Text Lesson is only one of many ways that teachers can help develop syntactic sensitivity with students. Simply reading syntactically complex texts to and with students, followed by a discussion of how readers have to use their syntactic knowledge to make meaning, is a common way of developing this syntactic awareness in students.

Teachers who have employed this lesson with their struggling readers have remarked to us that the simplicity of the lesson makes it easy to prepare and implement and that the incorporation of modeled, assisted, and repeated reading helps to build students word recognition accuracy, automaticity, and expressiveness in reading. Teacher Noel Reasoner has used the Phrased Text Lesson regularly with her struggling readers. She notes that the lesson helps students notice how authors create meaning through phrases or "chunks of meaning." The use of the Text Phrased Lesson over a 1- to 2-month period helped many students develop fluency in phrasing that they began to generalize to all their reading.

Fluency is more than reading the words in texts accurately and automatically; it is also reading the word in texts with appropriate phrasing and expression that reflects and amplifies the meaning of the passage. The Phrased Text Lesson is one approach to helping students gain proficiency in this often neglected area of fluency.

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