

Fluency Development Lesson Closing the Reading Gap

An artful approach to literacy instruction

Julia Armstrong

As a reading specialist, I am often searching for materials that expand my knowledge of literacy instruction while also offering suggestions or activities which will motivate my students. A few years ago, I purchased *Artfully Teaching the Science of Reading* by Dr. Chase Young, Dr. David Paige, and Dr. Timothy Rasinski. This text describes the importance of balancing evidence-based literacy instruction, in a manner that is engaging and meaningful to students. I agree with their description that teaching in this manner is an *art* because teachers must *creatively* design and differentiate their instruction so that students comprehend and make connections with the material. When instruction is meaningful, students can infuse the new information into their prior knowledge. This text reaffirmed my belief that children need to understand the purpose for learning - *Why is this information important and how can I use it?* In other words, we should not just teach skills in isolation to improve data. After all, data points are irrelevant if our students cannot apply this information into their world outside of school.

This year, I am working with a group of students who have solid decoding skills - they just need to improve their fluency and comprehension. I was searching for a way to incorporate activities that were instructional AND meaningful, when I saw Dr. Bommarito's interview with Dr. Rasinski and Dr. Kulich about their book, *The Fluency Development Lesson: Closing the Reading Gap*. This text was exactly what I was searching for because it addresses the fluency and comprehension needs of my students! After I purchased the book, I began incorporating the lessons with my students. The Fluency Development Lesson uses poems to improve fluency, and the book is divided into units for 1st through 5th grade. Each unit contains a poem written by Dr. Harrison with lessons that align to each poem. The lessons reinforce foundational skills, vocabulary, comprehension skills, parts of speech, and figurative language. The students read a poem each day for a week and the teacher provides some background knowledge by introducing new vocabulary and unknown concepts. Then, the teacher reads the poem with the

appropriate pace and prosody. This is a key component because students need to *hear* how the reading should sound. I demonstrate how to pause at the punctuation - or where to pause if there are no punctuation marks. I may also re-read the poem and ask the students to visualize and illustrate the poem. Then, the students complete one of the activities designed to promote listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The next day, we used the choral reading technique, so my students had the opportunity to read accurately with appropriate prosody and pace. After the choral reading, the students complete another activity. Throughout the week, my students read the poem in many ways, including echo reading and reading to a partner. At the end of the week, we have a performance session where each student can read to the group.

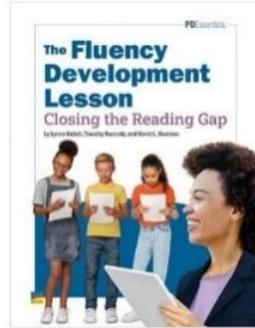
When I first introduced the FDL lesson to my students, I explained that we would read a poem a week and each day of the week we would re-read that poem in a variety of ways. I could sense that my students were skeptical about this method, so I explained that this approach will make their reading “sound like talking.” I was not sure if they completely understood so I used an example that they could relate to - I connected poetry to music. I explained that lyrics to songs are a form of poetry whether it is a rock, rap, or country song. When we listen to a poem, or a song, some of the words are grouped together into one. They grasped the concept once I sang some sample lyrics of songs that they recognized. So, we began our journey with the FDL model and what an exciting and successful adventure it has been! My students can navigate and apply the skill-based lessons, and they enjoy making connections in the writing prompts. I also appreciate that the students have options for the writing prompts. They also **love** Dr. Rasinski’s word ladders! It is such a clever way of introducing vocabulary and incorporating foundational skills! My students think of the word ladders as a game. I watch them as they work together, often shouting the answers. One student said, “I feel like a detective looking for clues!” This is a perfect example of *artful* instruction because my students were so enthusiastic and engaged in the lessons that they did not even realize they were learning. These “magical moments” are what educators seek to accomplish. Therefore, I consider this resource to be a “one-stop shop” because it encompasses all strands of Scarborough’s *Reading Rope*, and it is easy to

implement in less than 30 minutes. I admit that I was not sure how my students would feel about re-reading the same poem several times. However, that is the key component to this technique and re-reading really does improve fluency! For example, last week during a performance, one student asked if he could re-read his poem because he wanted to “make it sound better - like a teacher.” That was another groundbreaking moment when I realized that my students are “developing an ear” for what fluent reading sounds like in a matter of weeks! And the “icing on the cake” is that their data has shown REMARKABLE improvements since we started! Both the reading rates and accuracy rates on the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency passage improved for each student. The following table shows the accuracy and fluency scores for the Oral Reading Fluency passage before I began using the Fluency Development lessons and the accuracy and fluency scores after 5 weeks of lessons.

ORF scores before using <i>The Fluency Development Lessons</i>	ORF scores after using <i>The Fluency Development Lessons for 5 weeks</i>
Student A: 92% accuracy 88 WPM	Student A: 99% accuracy 113 WPM
Student B: 89% accuracy 64 WPM	Student B: 100% accuracy 117 WPM
Student C: 94% accuracy 89 WPM	Student C: 99% accuracy 124 WPM
Student D: 99% accuracy 80 WPM	Student D: 98% accuracy 125 WPM
Student E: 97% accuracy 69 WPM	Student E: 100% accuracy 134 WPM

My students’ ORF (Words Correct per Minute) scores went from an average of 78 WCPM to 123 WCPM – a gain of 45 words read correctly per minute! Even though this is just a data point and perhaps even an oversimplification, the gains students made in just the first five weeks of using the Fluency Development Lesson equated to over half the gains these very same students made in their combined first 4 years of school! I enjoy showing my students their growth over time and by seeing these improvements their confidence as readers has improved significantly.

I attribute their growth to the use of the Fluency Development Lesson – a well-designed and research-based series of lessons!



Julia Armstrong is a reading specialist and a children’s book author who lives in Maryland. She has worked in Title 1 elementary schools with diverse populations, throughout her 29-year career in education. Julia has published 16 decodable texts through Amazon called the *Word Work Wonders Decodable Text Series*, three series of short passages which align with word sort programs and a series of passages which feature multisyllabic words, located on TpT.

Julia also enjoys integrating music into her instruction. She and her husband Chris created puppet skits to reinforce various phonics skills through music and short rap songs. The skits are located on their YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/@wordworkwonders4814>

Addendum

I would like to update this blog to share some recent data from the DIBELS Mid-Year assessment. My fifth-grade students made significant progress with their fluency rates AND their comprehension, which is the MAZE assessment. I attribute this success to the implementation of the *Fluency Development Lesson Plan*.

Beginning of the Year DIBELS scores before using the Fluency Development Lesson Plan	Middle of the Year DIBELS scores after using the Fluency Development Lesson Plan
Student A: 92% accuracy 88 WPM 6 MAZE 319 Composite score - Yellow (Below Benchmark)	Student A: 99% accuracy 134 WPM 20.5 MAZE 406 Composite score - Green (Met Benchmark)
Student B: 89% accuracy 64 WPM 12 MAZE 297 Composite score - Red (Well Below Benchmark)	Student B: 100% accuracy 101 WPM 18 MAZE 374 Composite score - Red (Well Below Benchmark) *Note: Student met benchmark in accuracy and MAZE but missed the WPM benchmark goal
Student C: 94% accuracy 89 WPM 6 MAZE 318 Composite score - Yellow (Below Benchmark)	Student C: 99% accuracy 129 WPM 22 MAZE 401 Composite score - Green (Met Benchmark)
Student D: 99% accuracy 80 WPM 6 MAZE 312 - Composite score - Red (Well Below Benchmark)	Student D: 99% accuracy 138 WPM 14.5 MAZE 408 Composite score - Green (Met Benchmark)
Student E: 97% accuracy 69 WPM 14 MAZE 302 - Composite score - Red (Well Below Benchmark)	Student E: 100% accuracy 129 WPM 17 MAZE 400 Composite score - Green (Met Benchmark)

These students were released from this intervention, and they are working on activities in class to maintain their fluency and comprehension. I recently began using these Fluency Development Plan lessons with my new fifth-and

fourth-grade groups, and I will also be transitioning to these lessons with my third and second-grade groups as well.

I am going to try an additional idea with my primary students. Dr. Rasinski granted permission for me to put the lyrics of the poem to music. So, I collaborated with our fantastic music teacher, Robert Sirois, to take the lyrics from one of the poems and turn it into a song. I plan to use this technique with my second-grade group because I believe singing the lyrics to a rhythm will help them develop an “ear for fluency.” In other words, singing the lyrics to a beat will help them understand how fluent reading sounds. My plan is to have the students sing the poem and then read the poem. I believe this technique will provide the added support in fluency and comprehension that my students need, and I am eager to track their progress.

