

The Fluency Development Lesson: Where Albert & Pablo Hang Out

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Recently, while preparing for a keynote address at the Broward County Schols Science of Reading Symposium, I revisited a book I had read, “Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can’t Read, and What Can Be Done About It” by Dr. Mark Seidenberg. He suggests that we shouldn’t talk about language and decoding skills as two separate constructs because they’re synergistically connected in the reading brain. Readers who can orthographically and automatically map sounds to their corresponding letters and conjure up a semantically appropriate image or definition are likely to read fluently and comprehend. If we want students to decode fluently, then educators need to explicitly teach students how phonemes partner with graphemes to form words. If we want them to comprehend, then we need to teach students that words have meaning and depend on context. Think of orthographic mapping as a rubber stamp transforming words to memory in the brain. As Tim Rasinski likes to say, “Every word wants to become a *sight* word.”

So, how can we help students convert these words to memory so they can decode fluently and comprehend? Short answer – explicit fluency instruction and lots of practice.

Fluency is:

- **Automaticity** = the ability to decode at an appropriate pace; not too fast or too slow
- **Accuracy** = the ability to correctly decode
- **Prosody** = the ability to read with appropriate expression, intonation, and phrasing

Decades of research suggest evidence-based instructional practices that develop fluency skills.

Evidence-based practices include:

- **Choral reading** = whole class, small groups, or pairs of students read aloud simultaneously
- **Echo reading** = an I Do – You Do technique, where students listen to a reader and follow along in a text before they echo what they heard
- **Repeated reading** = students practice rereading a familiar sentence or passage
- **Phrased reading** = reading smoothly by grouping words from a sentence into meaningful chunks
- **Audio assisted reading** = students read along and track the text while listening to an audio version

- **Readers' theatre** = a collaborative strategy in which students rehearse and read parts in a script; no memorization required

While these practices, alone, are effective, together they deliver a powerful punch and a win for fluent reading. **The Fluency Development Lesson (FDL)** is where these practices come together in a synergistic manner in which the integration of individual fluency approaches into a single lesson format is greater than the sum of individual approaches themselves. I love implementing the FDL because it embodies the science and art of teaching reading – it's where Albert Einstein and Pablo Picasso hang out. I'm not the only FDL fan. The National Reading Panel (2000) recognized the FDL as an evidence-based approach and reminded us that although fluency should be taught, it's often not. Tim and I have been on a mission to change this once and for all.

In the early 2000s I implemented the FDL in my elementary classrooms and with refugee children as part of my doctoral research. No other instructional practice helped students convert spoken language to written language, develop reading stamina, and experience the joy of connecting aesthetically with a text.

Read on to learn about my journey...

After I discovered the FDL, I adapted it to create a five-day lesson using poetry in grades 1-3. Each day while students practiced reading aloud a grade-level poem, we discussed the poet's purpose and theme, discovered the meaning of unfamiliar words, noted examples of alliteration or onomatopoeias, and highlighted r-controlled vowels, for example. I used my reading curriculum and scope and sequence to select the most appropriate poem to study and read each week. Nothing was "willy nilly." In addition, I incorporated writing activities into the FDL because when students read they should write and vice versa. Students also took their poems home to read to and perform for families as part of the week's activities. As a cumulative activity, I invited families to attend our end-of-year poetry party. Each student fluently read their favorite poem and participated in readers' theatre. Every single student was reading at grade-level in spring! (It's worth noting that my students weren't all reading at grade-level when they entered school in fall, and many received Title 1 reading services or were Multilingual Learners.)

Nothing closed reading gaps and accelerated learning for my students like the FDL. This is why I chose to use the FDL for my doctoral research with refugee children from Myanmar. I supported elementary and middle school students who were relocated to Akron, Ohio from refugee camps in Myanmar. These children were not only learning English but learning how to thrive in a new country. Using the FDL, I artfully wove together the science and art of teaching reading to help students learn to decode and comprehend English. They learned, laughed, and loved spending time engaged in activities aligned to the poems.

Curious to know exactly how to implement the five-day FDL? Tim, Poet David L. Harrison, and I have included in our book, *The Fluency Development Lesson: Closing the Reading Gap*, a step-by-step protocol for you to follow. What's more, you can teach parents and care givers to implement the FDL. You likely have parents who ask, "What can I do to help my child at home?" Instead of telling them to just read with their child, I suggest you share how to implement the FDL – it's easy! Script the path so they can consistently follow the same protocol with each new text. Be sure to provide a simple set of instructions, and/or create a video in which you model the FDL. Translate instructions for families whose heritage language isn't English.

As I travel to speak with educators, I'm often asked if they can implement the FDL in any grade, with any text, and during any tier. The answer: Yes, yes, and yes!

Let's say you're teaching Kindergarten students and using a decodable reader focused on single syllable, short /a/ words. You've explicitly taught students to isolate the phonemes in /cat/ and substitute phonemes to make /bat/, /mat/, /sat/, etc. Your students need practice decoding those words in sentences like "The cat sat on the mat." Imagine you're teaching middle school science. Select a paragraph from your grade-level expository text. Follow the FDL protocol and remember to explicitly teach new vocabulary, reinforce phonemic awareness, build content knowledge, and include dialogic conversations, and writing activities.

Searching for Albert and Pablo? Look no further than ***The Fluency Development Lesson: Closing the Reading Gap!***

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