

Fluency Instruction to Increase Vocabulary Retention and Improve Reading Comprehension

This report was written from the perspective of Ms. Mackenzie Eikenberry, the third and fourth grade dual language teacher who implemented the fluency/vocabulary instruction in her classroom.

While conducting the action research in the fall of 2017, Ms. Eikenberry had the guidance of Dr. Tim Rasinski, author of the Fluency Development Lesson instructional model. Dr. Rasinski is a professor of literacy education at Kent State University and director of its award-winning reading clinic. Ms. Barbara Kruger, director of professional learning at VocabularySpellingCity, supported Ms. Eikenberry with incorporating VocabularySpellingCity into the fluency lessons. [Resources to Implement Dr. Tim Rasinski's Fluency Development Lesson Plan](#)

Rationale

My third and fourth grade students were part of the dual language program. I was responsible for teaching all subjects in English while my partner taught them in Spanish. In the mornings, I taught 19 third graders and in the afternoon, I taught 24 fourth graders. Most of my students were English Language Learners (ELL) and all of them qualified for free or reduced lunch. Many of my students' parents spoke limited or no English.

An area of concern was that many of my students did not read fluently. Some students stopped or hesitated too frequently when decoding words, which made it difficult for them to extract meaning from the text. Other students could orally read most or all of the words, but not with appropriate automaticity (as measured by reading rate) or expression. In both situations, reading comprehension was compromised.

When reading, many of my students needed to improve in word recognition accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (expression) to become fluent readers. If my students were able to recognize words in text automatically, their cognitive energy was freed up to focus on comprehension. If readers invested too much time and energy on individual words, there was less cognitive energy available for text comprehension. Additionally, there was also a strong correlation between prosodic/expressive oral reading and silent reading comprehension. Expression in reading allowed students to reflect and elaborate on the meaning of the text. Less proficient readers usually lacked expression when reading aloud. For this reason, I wanted to incorporate authentic texts such as poetry, reader's theater scripts, and songs that can be performed orally and with expression, rather than experienced silently. Performances are also part of the Florida English Language Arts Standards, and this was an engaging way to incorporate this standard into my lessons.

Students also needed repeated exposures to words over extended periods of time to move vocabulary words from short-term to long-term memory. Spaced independent practice was

essential to long-term retention because the practice over time provided students with the opportunity to repeat, restate, refine, and reflect on their own learning.

The instructional approach for fluency instruction was based on Tim Rasinski's Fluency Development Lesson (FDL). This approach could be used with all my students. The questions that guided my project were:

- Will daily FDL improve my students' fluency and comprehension?
- Will daily use of VocabularySpellingCity (VSC) within the FDL improve students' vocabulary retention and reading comprehension?

Fluency Development Lesson Plan

I implemented the FDL for 40 school days and introduced a new short text each day.

Preparation for the Project

1. Select text and identify 5 words from each text
2. Make 2 copies of each poem for each student
3. Create word lists in VocabularySpellingCity
4. Create Pre- and Post-test
5. Create Student Survey
6. Create Teacher Observation/Reflection Journal
7. Get binder or folder for students to keep their collection of texts

FDL Daily Routine

1. Introduce and display copy of the text (usually a new poem each day). Teacher reads text twice while students follow along silently. (3 minutes)
2. Discuss text (meaning, structure, illustration), selected vocabulary, and oral reading performance (expression, pauses, etc.) (3-5 minutes)
3. Choral reading text- teacher leads once or twice (1-2 minutes)
4. Choral reading text- students lead once or twice (2-3 minutes)
5. Students break into groups of three or four, to choral read together two or three times (2-3 minutes)
6. Students perform for another group (3 minutes)
7. Students use VocabularySpellingCity to play with and explore selected vocabulary words - to be done as a center rotation

Day 1: *Flashcards*

Day 2: *Which Word Initial Sound, Which Word Final Sound, or Sound It Out*

Day 3: *Word-O-Rama, Which Word Definition, or Which Word Sentences*

Day 4: *SillyBulls, Word Search, or Hang Mouse*

Day 5: *MatchIt Definitions or MatchIt Sentences*

Day 6: *Word Unscramble or Crossword Puzzle*

When Finished with Assignments and have free time - Free Choice

8. Students place the text in their binders and a copy is sent home for students to continue practicing their fluency. Students are encouraged to read the new text at least five times at home to a family member, friend, or even a pet.

Data to be Collected

- Student Surveys
- Teacher Observation/Reflection Journal
- VocabularySpellingCity Pre- and Post-test
- i-Ready® Student Growth Report
- i-Ready® Class Norms Report
- VocabularySpellingCity Usage
- Fluency Assessment using Fluency Rubric for expressive reading
- Fluency Assessments (words correct per minute on a grade level passage)
- Student Fluency Video - Pre- and Post-Study (optional)

Observations & Recordings

Delivering these lessons was something that my students and I looked forward to each day. At first, I was concerned about squeezing in these 12-15 minute lessons, but after a few days I could see the benefits. I initially noticed an increase in student engagement. Their faces lit up when it was time for FDL, and I didn't have to ask them twice to get out their poetry binders.

The classroom helpers handed out two copies of the daily poem - one to keep in school and the other to practice reciting at home. The students put one copy in their binders and the other went directly into their homework folders. By providing the additional copy for students to share with their families, I heard from students and parents some unexpected benefits such as:

“My whole family read the poem together.”

“You should have heard the way my father read this poem.”

“My child *FaceTimed* his grandmother just to read her the poem.”

“My mom read one part, and I read the other.”

“My child is not only reading her poems, she is also reading books.”

“I wrote my own poem last night.”

The FDL routine was easy to follow and implementation felt natural. Students looked forward to that day's poem and enjoyed reciting it as a group, reading it to a partner, and reading it independently. I enjoyed stepping back and listening to my students as they helped each other with phrasing or offered each other advice.

At first, I thought that teaching five vocabulary words found in the daily poems would be overwhelming for the students and me. However, this part of the lesson only took about five minutes. I introduced each of the preselected words, discussed its meaning, and gave some examples or made a connection to help students understand how the words were used in the poem. The real magic for getting students to own these words came later when they completed the VocabularySpellingCity assignments, which will be noted below.

During the lesson, I took a few minutes to discuss something special about the poem. This opportunity provided a teachable moment to point out poetic and literary devices, such as word choice, syntax and structure, figurative language, and author’s voice.

By the end of the lesson, students had read the poem at least five times, had enough confidence to read the selection on their own, and felt comfortable using the new vocabulary.

Here are two of my students’ favorite poems:

The Grump!

<p>(1ST VOICE)</p> <p>Perfect day!</p> <p>Warm weather</p> <p>Smell the flowers</p> <p>Pat a kitty</p> <p>Feed some birdies</p> <p>Pat a bunny</p> <p>Gentle clouds</p> <p>You're so gloomy</p> <p>So much joy</p> <p>I think positive</p>	<p>(2ND VOICE)</p> <p>I think not</p> <p>Sticky hot</p> <p>Makes me sneeze</p> <p>No, I'll wheeze</p> <p>Hate their litter</p> <p>Nasty critter</p> <p>Feels like rain</p> <p>You're a pain</p> <p>So much rot</p> <p>I think not!</p>
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Waiting At The Window

by A. A. Milne

These are my two drops of rain
Waiting on the window-pane.

I am waiting here to see
Which the winning one will be.

Both of them have different names.
One is John and one is James.

All the best and all the worst
Comes from which of them is first.

James has just begun to ooze.
He's the one I want to lose.

John is waiting to begin.
He's the one I want to win.

James is going slowly on.
Something sort of sticks to John.

John is moving off at last.
James is going pretty fast.

John is rushing down the pane.
James is going slow again.

James has met a sort of smear.
John is getting very near.

Is he going fast enough?
(James has found a piece of fluff.)

John has quickly hurried by.
(James was talking to a fly.)

John is there, and John has won!
Look! I told you! Here's the sun!

Before the implementation of the action research, providing the necessary vocabulary practice to my students proved difficult, particularly for my ELL students who needed more exposure to words compared to native English speakers. The use of VocabularySpellingCity served as a solution to this problem. With VocabularySpellingCity, I was able to not only provide vocabulary practice with the words of the week, but I was also able to provide practice with previously learned words. I accomplished this by simply creating an additional game assignment to review words pulled from prior poems. This way, students had the opportunity to pair lists with different vocabulary learning activities and play word games at least six times

throughout the week. My students' exposure to words more than doubled, which especially benefited my ELLs and struggling readers.

Another great feature of VocabularySpellingCity was that students could continue to play games with any list developed during the course of the study. Many of them continued to practice the vocabulary words at school when they completed daily assignments or at home after finishing their homework. I noticed that during free choice selection, students elected to play spelling games. Over time I started to see vocabulary words appear in their writing, which I certainly was not expecting.

Even though the study has concluded, the students still treasure their poetry notebooks filled with the FDL poems and they often reread them without prompting. There are even times when one student calls out the title of a poem and the whole class joins in. I see the value in FDL and plan to continue this instructional practice for the remainder of the school year. In fact, I plan to repeat this with my future classes, regardless of what grade level I am teaching.

The combination of FDL and VocabularySpellingCity has changed the way I teach. It is a simple, yet powerful method to increase vocabulary retention, fluency, and ultimately reading comprehension. One of the biggest unexpected surprises was the increase in student confidence and success.

Poetry Slam The study culminated with a poetry slam. Students could either select a poem from the study, find one on their own, or write their own. After selecting a poem, students could choose to perform their selection by themselves, with a partner, or in small groups. Even though most of the students had memorized their poem, they held a copy in their hands just in case they forgot a line. As there were no props or costumes, students had to use just their voices to convey the meaning of their poem.

To give the ambiance of a cafe, desks were pushed together and covered in black tablecloths with a fake candle and flowers on top, lights were dimmed, a microphone and speaker were set up, and soft jazz played in the background until the slam began. All of the students were dressed in jeans and black shirts. Parents and support staff were given a poetry slam program. I served as the MC, welcoming guests to the event and introducing each act. After each performance, the audience snapped their fingers in approval.

It was evident from the confident and joyful looks on my students' faces that they were proud of their accomplishments and knew they read their poems fluently. The adults were impressed by the students' performances.

Data & Data Analysis

The data collected confirmed significant improvement in fluency, vocabulary retention, and reading comprehension. Also, the student survey signaled a positive shift in student attitudes towards reading and word study.

The i-Ready assessment consisted of reading passages followed by questions based on the text. Since the assessment is adaptive, the passages became more difficult as students correctly answered questions from previous passages.

The data was used to determine student performance in terms of grade level expectations.

i-Ready Class Norms Report The i-Ready test provided information about each student's performance (scale score) relative to a group of nationally represented i-Ready students who were in the same grade and who took the test at the same time of year as my students.

Grade	Overall Scale Score		Student Growth	
	Pretest Average Scale Score (Checkpoint 1 - August 2017)	Post-Test Average Scale Score (Checkpoint 2 - January 2018)	Average Scale Score Achieved 40 school days	i-Ready Expected Target Growth for One Year
3	504.16	539.47	35.32	30
4	544.63	561.83	15.46	19

The overall scale scores indicated that both the third and fourth graders made substantial gains in reading. In 40 school days, third grade students made over a full year's growth, and fourth grade students achieved almost a year's growth on the i-Ready diagnostic reading assessment.

Student Growth Report The student growth report was used to determine how much growth students achieved between the diagnostic assessments, and measured progress towards end-of-year growth targets. On average, both the third and fourth grade students achieved the target growth for one year in a half a year's instruction. Ten of the third grade students exceed the Average Yearly Target Growth by mid-year with six of them having a Growth Score of +50. Six of the fourth grade students exceeded the Average Yearly Target Growth by mid-year as well.

i-Ready Percentile Scores at Pretest and Post-test When analyzing scores by percentile, the third grade gains of 18 percentile points from the beginning of the year to mid-year are impressive. Fourth grade made on average a 3 percentile gain. One reason they may not have shown as much growth is because their pretest scores were already above average (50 percentile). Nevertheless, both third and fourth grade students made gains in relation to their relative standing in reading achievement with the norming group of third and fourth grade students.

Grade	Pretest Average Scale Score by % (Fall - August 2017)	Post-Test Average Scale Score by % (Winter - January 2018)	Percentile Gain from Pretest to Post-Test
3	45%ile	63%ile	18%ile
4	59%ile	62%ile	3%ile

Oral Reading Fluency Using the 3-Minute Reading Assessment Expressive Reading Rubric, students showed impressive gains in prosody. Students improved significantly in their expression and volume, phrasing and intonation, smoothness, and pace. Word recognition accuracy (words correct per minute) indicated that students made statistically significant gains that were within normal expectations. These students were generally fluent readers to begin with, so I was not expecting anything more than normal gains.

Vocabulary Pre- and Post-test Vocabulary retention increased more for the third graders than the fourth graders, but both groups did show notable gains. One observation worth mentioning is that I noticed a confidence in my students as they began using these vocabulary words when speaking and writing.

Grade	Beginning	End	Increase
3	53.03%	79.74%	26.71%
4	65.89%	83.85%	17.97%

Conclusion

Even though there were gains in both grades, third grade increases were greater than fourth grade. This might be due to the fact that the fourth grade began the study at an already high level of performance. The data showed students had significant growth in:

- Reading Comprehension (i-Ready Scale Scores)
- Oral Reading Fluency (3-Minute Reading Assessment)
- Vocabulary Retention (VocabularySpellingCity Pre- and Post-Test)

The clear increase in student confidence is cause for celebration. Students are no longer hesitant to read aloud or perform in front of others, discuss texts, and use newly acquired vocabulary in their speaking and writing.

The burden of providing meaningful and accountable vocabulary practice was lifted when implementing VocabularySpellingCity. Students were eager to complete their assignments because they enjoyed the multitude of learning activities and games.

Reflections

As a teacher of the dual language program, time is precious because I have a split day. I am mindful of my classroom management and strive to ensure my instruction is effective and time efficient. At first, I was nervous that the Fluency Development Lessons would take up too much of my instructional time. Actually, it didn't take long to realize that I was not giving up time at all. Instead it was adding another layer of instruction to the curriculum I already had in place. The Fluency Development Lesson made it easy for me to teach vocabulary along with many of the ELA standards through poetry. The beauty of VocabularySpellingCity was it supported my explicit instruction of vocabulary by providing students with multiple exposures to words, which I did not have the time to implement effectively. Students enjoyed their VocabularySpellingCity assignments, which saved me time because I did not have to constantly remind them to complete their independent practice. Without that distraction, I was able to concentrate on my small group reading instruction.

Before I used the Fluency Development Lesson plan, I struggled with delivering the fluency practice my students needed. Now they are becoming proficient readers sooner, compared to the way I previously provided fluency instruction. I know my students are more confident readers and writers. I not only see their fluency improving, I see changes in their comprehension and academic writing. I believe all students can benefit from this plan and intend to share this experience with other teachers.