Most of what has been written concerning fluency has focused on beginning readers or readers who were having difficulty learning to read (e.g., Adams, 1990; Allington, 1983, 1984; Schreiber, 1980). From this work, we know much about the nature and importance of facilitating fluency in the initial stages of literacy acquisition, primarily to assure steady progress in reading development and the creation of independent, self-monitoring readers. However, the almost exclusive focus on beginning readers and readers experiencing difficulties with the acquisition of reading proficiency seems to unnecessarily circumscribe our discussions of fluency.

Despite research findings from the past 15-20 years and our new notions of the reading process—in which reading is viewed as the construction of meaning and as synonymous with comprehension (Langer, 1982; Spiro, 1980)—most articles and reading methods texts discuss fluency from a deficit view. In these instances, the focus is more often on dysfluency or word-by-word reading. Too often discussions of dysfluency suggest that such reading behaviors are a result of slow or deficient decoding or word recognition abilities, although we know that, even in the initial stages of acquisition, oral reading fluency is more directly linked to text comprehension processes than to word recognition (Clay, 1985).

Twenty years ago, Chomsky (1972) illustrated how syntactic competence develops as children read text, particularly with respect to their control of those syntactic structures that occur more often in the decontextualized language of books than in oral language. As children reread text and listen to a fluent reader read texts aloud, they develop familiarity with and control over new syntactic structures. Children who read more widely encounter more varied syntax and, ultimately, develop control over a larger corpus of such structures. This seems especially the case as children move from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood. Unfortunately, the syntactic sensitivities of readers, and the relationship of these sensitivities to fluency and understanding, are most generally neglected in discussions of reading fluency (Adams, 1990; Schreiber, 1980).

Too often, our focus on fluency with respect to beginning readers or readers experiencing difficulty has restricted our attention, and we have failed to consider some of the broader ramifications of an emphasis on fluency.

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especially with older and more developed readers. We often measure fluency only crudely (e.g., rate of reading) and evaluate fluency with short and unfamiliar texts. As Clay (1985) indicates, reading unfamiliar or familiar texts represents two different kinds of learning. Yet, in most classroom and remedial settings, fluency on unfamiliar material seems to be viewed as a fixed measure of reading ability, rather than one that can be developed. We infrequently hear discussions of how an emphasis on fluency might enhance the reading development of relatively mature readers and foster the development of higher order comprehension abilities. However, our view of fluency greatly influences the instruction we provide.

A Historical View of Fluency

Until just after the turn of the century, reading instruction emphasized oral reading. Fluency while reading orally provided the central measure of progress and demonstration of competence (Langer & Allington, in press). There was a substantial emphasis on “elocution”—the oral performance of a text that provided an interpretive rendition, allowing the listener to understand the writer’s argument and message. Many of the reading series of the 19th century included sections on elocutionary principles and some included printed cues as to appropriate intonation and emphasis (Venezky, 1987). The models set for attainment were the presentations of the great orators of the era, those who spoke with precision and emotion and used intonation, pitch, juncture (e.g., pauses), and stress to convey sympathy, anger, pride, or disdain. The teacher’s manuals of the era (often simply a page or two of “hints”) provided the rationale and bits of method for attaining such standards of oral reading performance.

After the turn of the century there was a great shift in instructional emphasis from oral to silent reading (Langer & Allington, in press). Silent reading performance became the predominant desired outcome of reading instruction, and the emphasis on fluency became restricted to the primary grades. It seems time now to reconsider that narrowed view, given our understanding of reading as a process where the reader constructs meaning. Can instruction on and practice with oral renditions enhance comprehension of complex texts, especially with older readers? How might we best think about the relationship between practice in reading aloud and improved understanding? Do we infer that improved prosody (stress, intonation, and duration) in oral reading leads to improved understanding?

It may help to review explanations of the benefits of elocution training provided before the shift to silent reading. One example is provided in A Complete Course in Reading, published in 1895 by M.W. Hazen. The motto of the series was “The way to learn to read is by reading.” Even then Hazen believed that “grouping” was fundamental to every reading lesson. By grouping Hazen meant “collecting in groups the expressions that are to be read as a single word” (p. iv). Hazen stated, “It has nothing to do with punctuation, but rests solely on the meaning” (p. iv). Such grouping brings out the “emphasis, inflection, and tone” of the passage. Hazen viewed the ability to group and, therefore, the ability to read with rhetorical pauses, inflection, and emphasis as something to develop. The key to successful oral reading, according to Hazen, was silent reading—“to read for ideas” (p. iv). Without silent reading, “oral reading is simply naming words, and must be too often senseless” (p. iv).

Hazen’s readers provide a caveat to teachers. Hazen supplied a few short questions and/or teaching suggestions following each passage, but at the end cautioned teachers to take sufficient time to assess student knowledge so as to find what questions to ask, as well as what to omit, in future lessons. Some teachers repeat again and again the questions whose answers are as well known by the class as their own names. This is as bad as it would be to continue drilling on the alphabet after pupils were reading Milton. (p. 209)

There were, however, some areas that Hazen believed should never be taken for granted, particularly knowing about the ideas in the passage—“the meaning” (p. 209). Also important were attention to rhetorical pauses, articulation,
emphasis, inflection, tone, pitch, and speed. Fluency, however, followed understanding.

A century ago Hazen saw oral reading fluency as a means to an end, firmly grounded in an understanding of the text, but in the intervening years, fluency has become an end in itself—the mark of the able reader—quite separated from understanding. Yet developing oral reading fluency, while not the only goal of reading instruction, has the potential to help readers develop more resonant understandings of text. In Hazen’s readers this emphasis was more apparent in the upper elementary grades than in the lower grades, a situation we now find generally reversed.

A Seventh-Grade Class and Fluency

The notion of using repeated readings with an instructional emphasis on fluency as a method of enriching the understanding of texts can be illustrated by the experience of a language arts class we observed recently (Stayter, 1990). This class of heterogeneously grouped seventh-graders spent 5 days reading, rehearsing, and performing short dramas. The students were divided into groups, and each group read a short play. Groups were determined by the number of parts in each play so that each student had an active role. On the first day, class time was used to read the plays silently. After the first silent reading, the groups began negotiating the casting of the play. More reticent students had the opportunity to opt for smaller parts, but everyone was involved. In the discussion that followed the silent reading, the students focused on more procedural aspects—casting and props.

On the second day, the students finalized the casting of the play and read the play aloud for the first time. At first the reading was understandably self-conscious. Some students read their lines very softly, others read with exaggeration inconsistent with the text or stage directions. One student who was receiving remedial services read each line with what seemed to be an effort to distract. For instance, “Come in” was said more like a bark than a greeting. As the students read, the group in general offered suggestions. Corrections, distractions, and laughter were common for the first 20 minutes. During this time, the students would pause to comment on each other’s voices—“You should sound like a snob,” one student recommended to a girl reading the part of a socially ambitious mother.

As the students continued reading, their understanding of their characters was revealed in the way they spoke their lines. From the earlier flat readings, exaggerated readings, and miscues, a more fluent and expressive reading was developing. The boy who had tried to distract the group with outrageous readings the previous day began working intently at interpreting his lines in a manner consistent with the general tone of the group. Self-consciousness was replaced by seriousness.

The students practiced their dramas for 2 more days before performing for their classmates. Students were interviewed after the performance and asked to describe their thinking and intent as they read and reread the dramas. The most prevalent response from the students concerned the use of repetition as a means to deepen understanding. One student said,

The first time I read to know what the words are. Then I read to know what the words say and later as I read I thought about how to say the words . . . . As I got to know the character better, I put more feeling in my voice.

Each rereading gave him an opportunity to “act out the part—to see how he [the character] would act. To try to figure him out.” The repeated readings and opportunity to play out his understandings in a group allowed the student to explore the possibilities of coming to know his character.

Another student described the value of the repeated reading by saying, “The more we practiced, the more we got into it. I thought more about what I had to say. I got to know what I was saying so I could say it more like real life.”

One student talked about repeated readings as a way to get beyond just the meaning in the words, “It’s more than saying just the words . . . you have to be like a person.” Repeated readings and response from her group gave her the support to develop the character in more
sophisticated ways than she would have done on her own.

A student receiving remedial services talked about how his understanding changed as he repeated his lines: "At first I read him differently, because I didn't see him as snotty. When we all read I got to see him as snotty. Then I knew the way I should talk." His understanding changed and developed because of his repeated readings and participation in the group. The understandings of the other students supported the growth of his understanding (Vygotsky, 1978).

Another student used his developing understanding of the character to alter his understanding of the world. The student read the part of an old man: "First I thought about what he does and what you might think he might do because of what he said." He perceived him as someone mean and angry. "I pictured him slamming the phone down." By the time he reread the play for the third time in his group, not only did he see the character differently, but the character remained with him long after he left the classroom. He listened to his grandfather so he could better understand how older people might speak. He observed elderly people in the local mall. In time he understood his character as "stubborn, not mean. I learned about the feelings of other people." This understanding, in turn, transformed his feelings toward elderly people. "They are not mean. They are set in their ways. They have feelings too."

As one student commented, "You can't start understanding everything the first time." Repeated readings are one way students can understand more. Dramatization and reading scripts invite, indeed necessitate, this kind of understanding.

Assessment: Portfolios and Recordings as Student Records

Recently, educators have begun to discuss the issue of more authentic assessment (Committee, 1989). How might we assess the understanding of these seventh graders? Will typical multiple choice questions give these students room to demonstrate what they know or how they know it? Can short answer essay quizzes provide anything beyond the "short right answer"? Would even carefully constructed "evaluative" questions posed by the teacher be sufficient to record the learning and understanding? Would a teacher's record book entry for any of these traditional assessments illustrate personal growth for the student and facilitate further growth or application of the strategies that emerged across these lessons?

Using assessment as a means to promote "thoughtful mastery" is the goal of our newer notions of assessment. The Committee for Appropriate Literacy Evaluation of the American Reading Council (1989) has offered brief descriptions of appropriate evaluation procedures that provide more authentic assessment of children's own work. One method receiving current attention is having students put together portfolios of their work done over a period of time. One of the kinds of work mentioned for inclusion in the portfolio is samplings of the student's oral reading from passages in books that the student can read fluently. Students would read and reread self-selected passages, audiotaping them for inclusion in the portfolio when they could read the passage fluently.

In addition to the audiotape, students might keep a record, in their own words, describing how their understanding of the passage developed. This might be done through interviews, journal entries, or a process paper. Thus, understanding is not simply inferred from fluency; rather, readers are allowed to explain their understanding and how it developed.

Another and perhaps more appropriate and powerful alternative evaluation procedure is exhibition. In the context of narrative texts, students actively present their dramatization and interpretation of texts. Drama is an excellent medium for exhibition, and successful dramatization demonstrates the deep and resonant understandings that are virtually unattainable in the most common sorts of assessments, representing the unique contribution of the arts to cognition (Eisner, 1981). Dramatizations of the radio-drama variety or interpretive readings can be preserved rather simply on audiotape, while
videotape recordings can be collected of full reenactments or of performances of selected scenes. In either case collecting student commentary of the sort presented above would enrich the record.

As group projects, dramatizations typically require a fairly intensive analysis and discussion of the intent and motivation of the author as well as the characters. When a reader, during a reenactment, speaks with the character's voice, we argue that comprehension is evident. When a reader becomes the character, assuming not only voice but posture, attitude, and tone, rich understanding is demonstrated. When that reader can offer the types of explanations presented above for the resonance in the voice, we argue that higher order abilities that seem in such short supply (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1990; Mullis & Jenkins, 1990) are being nurtured and developed. We need to capture these demonstrations for the record and organize such records so that we might ultimately use them in our attempts to evaluate growth and competence.

Conclusion

A century ago elocution was held in high regard and its relationship to oral reading fluency was well established. A half-century ago, Rosenblatt (1938/1968) suggested, "When we are helping students to better techniques of reading through greater sensitivity to diction, tone, structure, image, symbol, narrative movement, we are helping them to make more refined responses that are ultimately the source of human understanding and sensitivity to human values" (p. 290). We often seem to forget that oral rendition and comprehension can be intricately intertwined in classrooms, and especially in classrooms beyond the primary grades where characters and plots become richer and deeper and where the language of texts become fuller and broader.

We need to think about Lemke's (1989) notion of "talk on task" as a central tenet of language learning. Certainly dramatization of texts is a powerful method for eliciting student talk. The seventh graders we observed spent most of their class time talking, and when quiet they were typically rereading the texts. Their talk did not range far from the task and they brought their thoughts, experiences, and attitudes with them into the talk. They examined the texts for clues to the voice, diction, and intonation as well as the motives and attitudes of the characters and authors. By reading, rereading, and talking, the students had the opportunity to manipulate and transform meaning over time. Unfortunately, none of this was captured except in the researcher's audiotapes, field notes, and student interviews. None of the talk, none of the performance, and none of the understanding we observed was included as part of the formal records the school stores away for each child.

In closing we want to add that despite the emphasis here on oral reading, we hold the view that most reading should be personal and done silently, including reading in school. Demonstrations of, instruction on, and practice with oral reading can be both useful and enlightening but only as a means to an end—the fostering of active, independent, and self-aware readers. The goal is to develop analysis strategies and ways of thinking that readers use while reading for their own purposes. We want to develop readers who think about characters as they read and who ultimately can step into a character and assume the role. This "losing oneself in a character" is common among proficient readers, but it seems less so among the majority of children and adults who can read.

As odd as it may seem, one key to improving the situation may be to reconsider reading fluency and its role in the literacy curriculum beyond the primary grades. Perhaps we need only look back.

References


