

# INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, reading fluency has been neglected and misunderstood, and, as a result, reading fluency instruction in many classrooms has been ignored or implemented in ways that are not necessarily good instruction (Rasinski, 2012). For example, many teachers complain about having to do daily “timed readings” in their classrooms, in which students are prompted to read as quickly as possible, all in the name of developing reading fluency.

We feel that this neglect and misinterpretation of reading fluency is truly regrettable as a growing body of research has acknowledged that 1) reading fluency is essential to students’ reading development, and 2) a large number of students who struggle in reading exhibit difficulties in one or more areas of reading fluency. We can’t help but wonder that if reading fluency were made to be a truly essential and authentic component of the reading curriculum, students’ overall reading proficiency would increase and the number of students experiencing difficulty in reading would decline substantially.

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That is the hope of this book. In writing this book, we hope to provide you with a compendium or toolkit of fluency strategies that you can employ with students in grades two through five to improve their reading fluency, and in turn, increase their overall reading proficiency. Moreover, we have organized, or tiered, the fluency strategies around the individual and group needs of the students you work with. In this way, you are more able to choose fluency instruction that will best meet the needs of your students. More about the tiers is discussed later in this introduction.

## What Is Fluency?

Let's begin with a brief explanation of reading fluency. Essentially, we see reading as having two major components—a surface component and a deep component (Rasinski, 2010). The deep component of reading refers to comprehension or meaning. Readers have to use their cognitive resources to dig for and uncover the meaning that an author has embedded in her or his text. The deep reading component is the goal of all reading—to discover meaning in a text.

The surface component refers more to the mechanical tasks of reading—to decode the words in text as accurately and as effortlessly as possible and to read with expression to enhance the meaning of the text. Although we often think of expressive reading as happening only during oral reading, we feel that expressive reading happens during silent reading as well, especially if the reader is proficient in his or her reading. While, in a sense, the surface component of reading is less important than the deep component, it is essential for proficiency in reading. In order for readers to get to the deep level, they need to master the surface component first. Have you ever observed a reader who struggles in word decoding skills or who reads in a monotone, word-by-word manner? Chances are those readers struggle in making meaning as well.

Word recognition is clearly critical for reading. One cannot read if he or she is unable to turn the printed version of words into their oral equivalent, like a story that is heard. Developing proficiency in decoding words accurately is not sufficient, however. Word recognition must be developed to a point of automatic or effortless word decoding. The theory of automaticity suggests that all readers have a limited amount of cognitive resources or cognitive energy to put toward understanding what they read (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Essentially, cognitive energy refers to the mental manipulations we go through in solving a problem. That energy can be applied to a variety of tasks. However, because we have a limited amount of this energy, it needs to be used efficiently. Reading is a multitask activity. We think you will agree that proficient reading requires a reader to first decode the words encountered in print (surface task) and to next make sense of what the author is saying with the words (deep task). If a reader has to use too much cognitive energy to decode the words, less cognitive energy is available for comprehension. The students who read words in text correctly but in an overly labored, halting, and sluggish manner are using too much of their cognitive energy to decode the words. As a result, little energy is left for comprehension and it falters.

Our goal for word recognition should be accuracy and automaticity (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). When something is done automatically, it is done with little cognitive effort. So many things in life are done automatically: walking down the street, driving a car, brushing our teeth. We often do these tasks without paying much attention to doing them. The result is that we can usually multitask: walk down the street and chat with a friend, appreciate the scenery, think about a problem. When word recognition is developed to an accurate and automatic level, the reader can devote his or her attention to the more important, deep-level task of comprehension. The best example of a reader who is automatic is most likely you reading this page. You do not have to analyze or sound out every word on the page. Rather, you are instantly and effortlessly recognizing the words and thus are better able to pay attention to the meaning we are attempting to share with you. Research has demonstrated that accuracy and automaticity in word recognition are strongly correlated with good comprehension. The better readers are at accurate and automatic word recognition, the more proficient they are in reading comprehension.

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And so, the first major component of fluency is accurate and automatic word recognition. And, like walking or driving a car or brushing our teeth, both accuracy and automaticity are developed through lots of practice.

The second major component of reading fluency is expression in oral reading (Schreiber, 1980). The technical term for reading with good expression is *prosody*. Consider this: The most fluent speaker you can think of is one who speaks with appropriate expression, holds your attention, and enhances the meaning of her or his speech. Now think of a less-than-fluent speaker, one who speaks in a slow, monotone manner. Chances are you have difficulty keeping your attention on the message of the speaker and are less likely to understand what that person may be saying.

The same is true in reading. Readers who read with good expression are reflecting and enhancing the meaning of the text they are encountering. Readers who read with poor expression are less likely to understand the text they are reading. Expression includes reading with appropriate volume and confidence, raising and lowering the pitch of one's voice appropriately,

pausing at appropriate places in the text, phrasing the text into meaningful units, emphasizing particular words and phrases, and reading with a rate or speed that enhances meaning—slowing down and speeding up as necessary. As with word recognition, research has demonstrated that expression is correlated with overall reading proficiency. Readers who read with good expression tend to be proficient readers even when reading silently, and those who read with minimal expression tend to be less proficient readers even when reading silently.

So we view word recognition and expression as the two critical components of fluency. Developing these components will allow readers to go deep into meaning and become more proficient readers. In the following chapters, we will share with you lessons for developing fluency competency among your students.

## Tiers of Fluency Instruction

One of the unique features of this book is that we have sorted the fluency lessons into three tiers. In doing so, we provide you with a way to differentiate the fluency instruction you wish to provide to your students and meet the needs of individuals and groups of students with whom you work. The Response to Intervention framework (RTI) is a multilevel prevention and intervention system consisting of three tiers. All students begin on the first tier and receive research-based general instruction from the teacher. Generally, we understand this as the regular classroom curriculum or instruction. The second tier is for students who do not respond to Tier 1 instruction. These students may be slightly behind their peers or grade-level expectations, indicating the need for additional support. Tier 2 instruction is typically offered in a small group setting, and the interventions are always research based, which aim to close the gap between their performance and grade-level expectations. Finally, students who still demonstrate difficulty ascend to Tier 3. On this tier, we offer intense, research-based instruction that is proven to rapidly increase reading proficiency. Many times, Tier 3 students receive one-on-one instruction provided by the classroom teacher or reading specialist (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

### *Tier 1*

Tier 1 fluency instruction could be given to all students in a classroom. It is the type of instruction that could easily fit into a regular classroom curriculum and may include many of the types of activities that you already

engage in with your students. All students need some degree of fluency instruction, and Tier 1 instruction fits those needs.

### *Tier 2*

Tier 2 fluency instruction is intended for students who may need a bit of a boost in fluency. Students who could benefit from Tier 2 fluency instruction may be developing as readers. However, their fluency development may not be as robust as you would like. Continued lagging in fluency may eventually result in these students requiring more intense intervention in reading, not only in fluency but in other areas as well. Because fluency is, in a sense, a gateway to deeper levels of proficiency in reading, difficulties in fluency may eventually result in other competencies being underdeveloped. The notion behind Tier 2 fluency instruction is to intervene early enough and with sufficient intensity to overcome fluency concerns before they lead to other more significant reading problems.

### *Tier 3*

Some students unfortunately do not develop well in fluency, and this lack of development leads to other concerns in reading, such as poor comprehension, lack of confidence in reading, and lack of interest in reading. Readers who are not fluent not only suffer from poor comprehension, but they also see themselves as unsuccessful readers and view reading as an unenjoyable task to be avoided whenever possible. One of the primary goals for these students is to develop some degree of fluency that allows them to move on to addressing the other concerns. Tier 3 instruction, then, is intended for individuals or small groups of students who exhibit significant difficulties in reading fluency that are impacting other areas of reading.

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Our goal in writing this book is that you will be better able to make instructional decisions that are most appropriate to your students' instructional needs. Please keep in mind, however, that there is a great deal of flexibility

in how you choose, modify, and implement the instructional models we provide. Any instructional lesson can be modified for work with individual students and larger groups of students. Moreover, we hope that the lessons and their components will empower you to develop your own models of fluency instruction in order to meet the specific needs of your students.

Fluency is indeed a critical component of proficiency in reading. And yet, it is too often neglected or misunderstood. We hope that the following chapters will allow you to make fluency a major goal of your own reading curriculum and, as such, help all of your students move to higher levels of overall proficiency and satisfaction in reading.