

# Assessment as a Strategy to Increase Oral Reading Fluency

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This article highlights the use of assessment as a strategy to achieve more effective reading fluency outcomes. Appropriate and thorough assessment practices can identify underlying difficulties that manifest as slowed oral reading rates. An intervention that systematically addresses the word reading difficulties often associated with a lack of oral reading fluency is described.

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For students with reading disabilities who experience difficulties with oral reading fluency, school-based interventions frequently focus on increasing speed through interventions such as repeated reading of texts. This article highlights the use of assessment as a strategy to achieve more effective reading fluency outcomes. Appropriate and thorough assessment practices can identify underlying difficulties that manifest as slowed oral reading rates. An intervention that systematically addresses the word reading difficulties often associated with a lack of oral reading fluency is described.

- Reading fluency data are increasingly being collected in schools.
- These data are valid in alerting educators that students' fluency may not be developing as expected; however, they are not useful in determining the possible sources of underlying problems.
- Nonetheless, many educators have come to believe that fast reading is the main goal in fluency assessment and intervention.
- A common course of action then becomes the automatic implementation of interventions focusing on faster reading.
- Instead, additional assessments are often needed to determine possible underlying reasons for a slow oral reading rate so that subsequent interventions are more likely to be effective.
- Many definitions acknowledge that fluent reading requires two tasks that must be performed at the same time: decoding and comprehension.
- They further emphasise that the aspects of speed and prosody are indicators that fluent reading is taking place.

### **Skills assessed**

- Letter-sound correspondences
- Word recognition
- Decoding
- Oral reading fluency
- Reading comprehension



### **The study**

This article is concerned with students whose fluency difficulties are rooted in inaccurate and laborious reading of words. To illustrate how an intervention aimed at improving the accurate, effortless, reading of words and text can improve fluency (and comprehension), an example case is provided. This example highlights the value of using assessments to look closely for the underlying cause (or causes) of non-fluent reading when designing an effective intervention. In the intervention, graduate-level practicum students (tutors) are paired with children who experience problems with reading. Using specific assessments, the tutors come to understand the connection between word reading difficulties and slowed or poor fluency as well as how to develop targeted and effective interventions. For one semester twice a week, tutors met one-on-one with students.

### **Case sample 'Devan'**

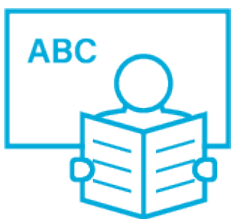
- Devan was in second grade and was not making adequate progress in reading; nor was he responding to the fluency intervention implemented in his school.
- Devan's tutor Nina discovered that he exhibited avoidance behaviours toward reading.
- Devan did not enjoy reading because of his inability to read stories.
- Nina observed that Devan was not only reading text slowly but also reading many of the words inaccurately.
- Devan read only 50% of the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level words correctly.
- For 1<sup>st</sup> grade level reading passages, Devan correctly answered all comprehension questions. Therefore, it appeared that when he was able to read the words in the passages, he was able to comprehend the meaning.
- Nina knew she had to intervene where there would be maximum benefit; that is, focusing on helping him both accurately and effortlessly recognise words.

## Devan's intervention

- The intervention selected for Devan was adapted from *Road to Reading: A Program for Preventing and Remediating Reading Difficulties* (Blachman & Tangel, 2008).
- This was selected because of evidence of its effectiveness and the fact that it has been used in both individual tutoring and classroom settings with successful outcomes in teaching students to decode.
- The programme provides systematic phonics instruction, as its levels are sequenced according to the six syllable patterns.
- Teaching the six syllable patterns in the English language provides a highly efficient way for students to decode approximately 86% of the words they encounter.
- By the end of tutoring, Devan made significant progress toward becoming an independent reader.

## The six syllable patterns

- Closed: one vowel followed by one or more consonants
- Silent-e: one vowel followed by one consonant, followed by the letter e
- Open: one vowel at the end of the syllable.
- Vowel team: two vowels that make one sound
- R-controlled: one vowel followed by r
- Consonant + le: one consonant followed by le



## Conclusions and implications

Like many students with reading disabilities, Devan had a slow

reading rate. The school's intervention consisted primarily of repeated practice reading-level texts. However, Devan failed to make the type of progress he needed to catch up to his more fluent peers, suggesting that he was not responding to the repeated reading fluency-only intervention. It was only after more targeted assessment and intervention addressing his underlying word reading difficulties that Devan showed improvements in reading rate, word recognition accuracy, and reading comprehension. Helping students become more fluent readers is too often misconstrued as a 'need for speed' and is addressed with interventions based on the singular goal of increasing students' reading rate. Without adequate background assessment, many teachers may not realise the limitations of oral reading fluency data, and they may also fail to gather additional data to assist them in making effective instructional decisions. Professional development providing support to educators is necessary to help them appropriately link assessment and instruction. Such opportunities would help to bridge the research-to-practice gap demonstrated in the example provided here, and increase the likelihood that readers like Devan receive interventions that target areas of need leading to significant, meaningful growth.