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The Unexpressive Reader

BY KELLI J. ESTEVES & SARA ROTHENTHALER

Reading aloud is a downright traumatic experience for Jenna. Most of her fifth-grade peers read fluently, some even read with wonderful expression, but when Jenna reads she stumbles over words and completely ignores punctuation. Her nerves get the better of her, which makes the experience all the more difficult. Her secret goal is to read in a low mumble as quickly as possible so that her peers don't pay attention to how much she struggles.

If you have had students like Jenna in your classroom, you know that expressive reading is important and plays a strong role in literacy development for students of all ages. It has clear significance relating to comprehension, attitudes towards reading, and overall reading proficiency. Struggling readers are frequently characterized as reading with a monotone voice, little expression, and inappropriate phrasing (Allington, 2009). Although the general topic of fluency has been given long-merited attention in the process of improving instruction for struggling readers, many have expressed concern about the use of certain standardized “fluency” assessments because of the hyper focus on speed-reading. An unintended consequence is that students focus solely on increasing their reading rate rather than establishing the meaning of the text (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2006). The National Reading Panel (2000) defines fluency as the ability to decode and comprehend text simultaneously, thereby acknowledging the multidimensional nature of fluency. This article explains reading expression and prosody, the links to comprehension, and offers practical strategies designed to help the unexpressive reader.

Prosody and the Struggling Reader

Fluency and automaticity have been used as synonyms when, in fact, reading fluency is defined as a reader's ability to process text with three key dimensions: accuracy in word decoding, automaticity in recognizing words, and appropriate use of prosodic features (Rasinski, 2004b). The logical progression from sounding out words to recognizing them on sight and reading with expression is a major undertaking. For this reason, prosody is an often-over-

looked element of reading fluency (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Rasinski, 2006). After all, it is difficult enough for some readers to progress to the second dimension—automaticity in recognizing words. Automaticity is characterized by efficient word recognition with little cognitive attention (Allington, 2009). Kuhn and Stahl (2003) suggest that the implication of automaticity in reading results in increased comprehension because readers can focus their cognitive resources on comprehending the text rather than decoding. Although automaticity is a relevant component of reading fluency, instruction to improve automaticity alone fails to acknowledge the multidimensional nature of fluency. Instruction to improve word recognition automaticity may be well-intentioned by most instructional programs and teachers, but it easily promotes fast reading without appropriate attention to comprehension, thus ignoring the ultimate goal of reading and fluency: meaning and understanding (Rasinski, 2006). Instead, fluency instruction should incorporate all three dimensions, including the often misunderstood element of prosody.

That invites the question: What exactly is prosody? Samuels and Farstrup (2006) define prosody as the rhythm and tone of speech applied to the expressive reading of text including intonation, stress patterns, and duration. Prosodic readers express intonation by varying pitch with punctuation. For example, a prosodic reader will signal a statement with falling intonation and a question with rising intonation. Prosodic reading is also noticeable when a reader places appropriate emphasis on words like nouns and verbs that impact the meaning of the sentence. Furthermore, readers who demonstrate prosody group text into syntactically appropriate phrases to make their reading sound more like spoken language

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(Kuhn, 2004). Put simply, a prosodic reader is one who reads in an engaging and expressive manner while attending to punctuation cues and the underlying message of the author.

Connection Between Expressive Reading and Comprehension

Significance is given to prosody because of its relationship with comprehension. Meaning is carried through the prosodic elements of intonation, phrasing, pausing, and overall expression, signaling to the reader that words alone do not represent the overall meaning of a text (Rasinski, 2003). A reciprocal relationship between prosody and comprehension seems to exist because prosody provides evidence of a reader's understanding of a text (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). The reader must interpret the author's words and express them in such a way as to communicate the underlying message. Prosodic reading allows readers to develop an interpretive inner voice beyond oral reading, so that when they read silently, that inner voice is lively and connects the reader to the text. Rasinski (2004a) argues that prosody (versus accuracy and automaticity) has a more direct link to comprehension because reading in an expressive manner indicates that the reader is trying to establish the meaning of the text and confusion can result from inappropriate groupings of words or improper expression (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005).

Instruction in reading fluency depends on the specific area (accuracy in word decoding, automaticity, or prosody) of need for the individual student. The activities explained subsequently address more than one area, but were selected due to their focus on helping students become prosodic readers.

Strategies that Foster Reading Prosody

Reading Role Models

Hearing expressive readers read aloud allows students to analyze the reading of an expert, model reader who draws attention to the quality of the oral reading. Students can strive to emulate the prosodic elements of pitch, volume, phrasing, and rate (Opitz & Rasinski, 2008). Rasinski suggests that while modeling prosodic features, the reader reveals that meaning is in the interpretation of the words, not just the words themselves. A true reading role model will read slowly to build anticipation, quickly when

the plot takes an exciting turn, quietly at sad or sensitive moments, and loudly to command attention. She will pause at just the right time, so that the words sink in and create distinct voices for each character. It is important to convey the message to students that both oral and silent reading involves the same, expressive, meaningful approach due to the link between prosodic reading and comprehension. Read aloud and listening to audiobooks are two ways to expose students to reading role models (Rasinski, 2003).

Read Aloud. Classroom read-aloud can be an enjoyable class experience and a purposeful instructional strategy with just a few simple suggestions. It is important to read slowly enough for expression and for students to make mental pictures. Include discussion after a read-aloud for both fluency and comprehension extensions. Brand and Brand (2006) stress that students need to discuss the effect of the reader's fluency relative to their understanding. Asking students what they noticed about modeled reading and keeping a chart of strategies for prosodic reading is a way to highlight important strategies like reading print features such as punctuation, describing how varying expression makes the reading lively, or documenting how phrases emphasize flow. This class conversation provides a vocabulary for students to improve their own fluency and help students dig deeper into the author's meaning (Brand & Brand, 2006).

Teachers can also promote reading aloud at home to foster prosody and overall fluency development. Inviting parents to read aloud with their children at home also provides an opportunity to form an emotional bond among children, parents, and books that fosters overall reading growth. Teachers can support parents in reading aloud at home by providing book suggestions and tips for reading with prosody in the newsletter (Opitz & Rasinski, 2008). Additionally, teachers can involve other members of the community or family to participate by being a guest reader in their classrooms. Students love the anticipation of someone different joining the classroom community to share new perspectives and voices in reading aloud. Whether done at home or at school, read aloud provides the opportunity to develop prosody and more. Brand and Brand eloquently encourage read aloud because this allows children to "enjoy stories, learn about the world, and integrate book language into their thinking as they

understand the importance of reading and writing and their lives" (p. 21, 2006).

Audiobooks. The accessibility of audiobooks has increased with the growth of new technologies developed in the last decade. Libraries around the country have invested in MP3 players, such as the Apple iPod, that have downloaded audiobooks to lend to patrons. When students are able to follow along with the actual book, it turns into a valuable instructional method for developing both automaticity and prosody because audiobooks provide both modeled reading and assisted reading. The simultaneous visual and aural feedback shows students how punctuation helps the reader know when to pause, models the use of inflection, and demonstrates how to use appropriate expression. Also, students are able to hear how trained orators and professional actors change their voices for different characters.

Teachers can allow students to listen to audiobooks during independent reading time or increase recreational reading by lending MP3 players for home use. School libraries can support teachers' efforts by building an audiobook collection and seeking technological resources that make listening to audiobooks easier. The instructional value of modeled and assisted reading with audiobooks coupled with interest and motivation generated from the wide variety available, certainly make playing audiobooks beneficial.

Poetry Cafe

Nothing is better suited than poetry for establishing the "rhythm, cadence, expression and prosody" of a text, and a poetry café is an engaging atmosphere for promoting the rehearsal required to publicly share poems in this environment (Robertson, 2008). Of course rereading and reading aloud a one-page report may (most likely not) accomplish prosodic reading, but a poetry café sets a much different scene. It creates a stage for the performance and celebration of well-loved poems. Such repeated practice is a proven technique for improving fluency and is a technique recommended by the National Reading Panel (2000) for improving fluency. It creates an anticipatory set of language structures for the students to apply to new situations and also improves automaticity through sight vocabulary and phrase recognition (Brand & Brand, 2006). Repeated reading of poetry works best with short text and high success rates (at least 85% accuracy on the initial read of the passage



according to the 1989 Dowhower review, as cited in Kuhn & Stahl, 2003), so teachers play an important role in providing choices for the students that allow for success (Kuhn, 2004).

The performance of a poem in a café setting provides the reader with motivation to convey the meaning of the poem to the audience through the use of prosodic features and can easily be established with a few basic considerations. First, students need choice; students should select or write a poem that has been rehearsed for performance with an audience. Faver (2008) suggests setting the scene by inviting parents and family members to a classroom with dimmed overhead lights, twinkle lights, a working microphone, and even hot beverages and cookies to establish the ambience for a chic poetry café. Or, the students can take the show on the road by performing at a nearby retirement home or for the school board at an evening meeting. Regardless of the format, students are learning elements of poetry, developing as prosodic readers, and performing for an audience.

An adaptation of the Poetry Café is to open up the café to other performances such as reading a favorite passage from a treasured book or magazine, reading their own writing, or telling a joke. The "Open Mic Night" at the café acknowledges the importance of student choice and honors individual interests; both significant factors for motivation. Students will delight in the opportunity to tell a short (politically correct and clean) joke or reciting a limerick. A microphone is optional; however, a real microphone

is a fun way to reward the practice and hard work that went into preparing for the performance.

Reader's Theater

Reader's Theater is an effective method of implementing performance reading that is authentic and engaging and communicates meaning that results in improvements in fluency, comprehension, and motivation (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999; Rasinski, 2003). Reader's Theater fosters prosodic reading with interpretation and meaning because the readers must use their voices to convey the meaning with the absence of costumes, props, and movement (Rasinski, 2003). Although the procedures for Reader's Theater can be simplified into a few simple steps, it may be useful to examine the procedures Keehn (2003) implemented that produced gains for struggling readers in multiple areas, including prosody. The five-day instructional approach for one treatment group in the study began with an explicit mini-lesson on fluency, an introduction of the books the scripts were based on, and modeled fluent reading of the text. Scripts were made available for practice independently or with a partner, but were not individually delegated until later in the week. On the second day of instruction, students practiced reading different parts from the script while the teacher provided feedback. After a similar procedure with additional coaching and modeling by the teacher, individual parts were assigned to students at the end of the third day's session. Day 4 involved repeated practice and coaching, culminating in a performance for an audience on the fifth day. The results of daily 40-minute Reader's Theater instruction over 6 to 8 consecutive weeks was a promising intervention for the lowest ability readers because it not only provided improved prosody, but it helped narrow the gap between higher ability readers in both rate and comprehension (Keehn, 2003).

In addition to procedural aspects, locating scripts that can be dramatically performed is a key to success in implementing Reader's Theater. Many scripts are readily available in collections and anthologies, and many books can easily be adapted into script form. To take script adaptation a step further, asking students to select a portion of text from popular series and revise it into script form while carefully interpreting the appropriate expression encourages several metacognitive skills (Allington, 2009). For example, consider having students revisit a popular

book like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney to create character dialogue and a narrator to re-enact one of the many unfortunate, yet humorous scenes. When students draft a script with carefully chosen words to fit the characterization the author intended or based on personal experiences, their conscious decisions reflect the metacognitive skills of monitoring and controlling thought (Martinez, 2006). Furthermore, during the rehearsal of their rendition to display the inferred expression and nuances of the characters (fear, embarrassment, and sarcasm of a so-called wimpy kid, for instance), students demonstrate deliberate selection of appropriate prosodic features and can monitor the effectiveness of their attempts before their performance is ready for an audience.

Script reading can extend beyond books to television and movies. Acknowledging students' interests through media not only succeeds in motivating students, but it allows another authentic setting for repeated practice and dramatization of performance reading. Selecting a portion of a script from a favorite movie to rehearse and perform can be highly motivating when the model to emulate happens to be in a *Star Wars* movie or even *High School Musical*. See the Resources section for websites containing original scripts from popular movies. Regardless of the type of script or medium for performing, dramatization provides several essential instructional components and authentic contexts for developing a struggling reader's prosody, overall reading ability, and certainly attitudes toward reading.

Punctuation Cues

Paying attention to punctuation is an essential trait of a prosodic reader. Knowing how to use punctuation to read with proper expression and intonation improves overall understanding of the text. Consider the sentence "What is in the road ahead?" It could be read:

What is in the road ahead?

What is in the road, a head?

Reading this sentence with the appropriate intonation and punctuation is key to understanding the meaning, especially because a child's interpretation with "a head in the road" would most certainly skew understanding of a text. Books such as *Punctuation Takes a Vacation* by Robin Pulver and *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves: Why Commas Really Do Make a Difference!* by Lynne Truss address the role of punctuation in the comprehension of ideas. Released in 2006 as a chil-

dren's book, its amusing illustrations depict just how a misplaced comma can change a sentence entirely.

Using a sentence from *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*, begin with writing a sentence on the whiteboard three times, but without punctuation. Read it aloud in a monotone voice and ask for suggestions from the class on how the sentence could be read with increased expression, in meaningful phrases, and with intonation.

Explicit teaching of intonation with punctuation has an entertaining flare when using Blevins' alphabet intonation activity (Blevins, 2001, as cited in Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). The activity involves reading familiar songs or simple sentences like a conversation using punctuation cues to determine inflection. For example, instead of singing the alphabet song in the traditional manner, the teacher inserts punctuation to indicate phrase boundaries and to determine inflection. This activity can be repeated with different variations of punctuation to emphasize how symbols influence the prosodic features. Because of the familiarity of the text, students easily attend to the punctuation while enjoying the dramatic deviation from a favorite song.

Feedback

Formative feedback is essential for developing effective use of prosody (Rasinski, 2004a). Coaching during oral reading provides opportunities for complementing moments of expressive reading, identifying areas to work on, and modeling ways to read a particular phrase or section of text. Brand and Brand (2006) suggest a short, 7- to 10-minute small-group approach for providing feedback for several weeks with individual follow up. Another approach is to record oral reading and listen to it with the student. Furthermore, a fluency rubric can be used to provide feedback with the goal of students monitoring their own prosody. Several fluency rubrics are available that go beyond accuracy and automaticity to address prosodic features. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) fluency scale provides a 4-point rubric for determining phrasing, syntax, and expressiveness to evaluate the naturalness of reading in addition to accuracy and rate (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). The Multidimensional Fluency Scale (available at www.timrasinski.com) is a rubric that addresses four areas: expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace (Rasinski, 2004a).

When providing feedback on a child's prosody, it is important to note a few important suggestions. The text being read aloud should be at an instructional level to ensure that cognitive energy is used for meaningful interpretation and prosodic reading. Consider using four different passages from the same familiar book to create a connected, authentic reading experience. You may want to keep the recordings as digital files so they can be used with iPods or burned onto a CD as a portfolio item. These recordings are a great way to convey improvement to the reader and communicate progress to parents as well.

Helping students develop into expressive readers can be quite engaging and enjoyable for both teachers and students. Read aloud, listening to audiobooks, and reading poetry are bound to be anticipated activities. Reader's Theater can create an opportunity for even the least fluent readers to shine and show off their expressive interpretation of high-interest text, while your coaching and feedback provide the scaffolding necessary to get struggling readers to higher levels of prosodic, expressive reading.

However you apply these activities, take note of how each addresses the requirement of students to actually read—not reading isolated words or decontextualized text, but wide reading, assisted reading, repeated reading, and recreational reading, all proven methods for improving overall reading proficiency. These methods foster expressive reading and support what teachers know intuitively about becoming an expert at any challenging endeavor: practice (Rasinski, 2003).

Resource List

The Read Aloud Handbook by Jim Trelease: Comprehensive analysis of the benefits of read aloud and offers read-aloud suggestions for teachers and parents. New York, NY: Penguin

Reconsidering Read Aloud by Mary Lee Hahn: Discusses effective read aloud and contains many read aloud suggestions. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

What Should I Read Aloud? by Nancy A. Anderson: Publication of International Reading Association that compiles lists of best-selling books for suggested age levels. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

How to Get Your Child to Love Reading by Esme' Raji Codell & planetesme.com: Teacher and parent

tips for using literature of all genres to inspire readers of all ages. Chapel Hill: NC: Algonquin Books.

American Library Association at www.ala.org: List of distinguished books and honor books.

Love to Know at movies.lovetoknow.com/wiki/Disney_Movie_Scripts: Links to scripts for many popular Disney movies.

ReadWriteThink at ReadWriteThink.org: Reputable resource for many lessons involving performing and writing scripts.

Online Reader's Theater Resources

Teaching Heart at www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm: Comprehensive index of free scripts, links to other Reader's Theater sites and resources.

Literacy Connections at www.literacyconnections.com/ReadersTheater.php: Information about how to get Reader's Theater started in your classroom, links to other online Reader's Theater sites, and links to scripts.

StoryCart at www.storycart.com: Sample scripts, scripts for purchase, and information about Reader's Theater books.

Aaron Shepard's Reader's Theater at aaronshp.com/rt/: Reader's Theater tips, free scripts, and scripts for purchase.

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