



Easy Books for Improved Adult Learner Reading Fluency and Comprehension

Basic teaching questions and robust applied research

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Gemma Open Door for Literacy: <https://gemmamedia.org>

Two persistent teaching questions

- 1. What materials do I ask learners to work with?
- 2. What experiences do I ask learners to have with the materials?
- Behind these are third and fourth questions:
- 3. Are the materials seen by learners as worthwhile?
- 4. *One way to tell this is:* What experiences do learners choose to have on their own with the materials?



I'll begin with a suggestion and a definition, then...

- If we wish our materials and learners' experiences with us to be seen by them as worthwhile, we would see our aim as our learners becoming independent readers.
- Independent reader = a learner who can engage in sustained silent reading and read materials of his or her own choosing for enjoyment or for other self-selected purposes



A few notes

- Independent reader = a learner who can engage in sustained silent reading and read materials of his or her own choosing for enjoyment or for other self-selected purposes
- Adult learners = reluctant readers or second language learners/readers 15 years and older
- Reading fluency = fast and accurate character and word recognition, and also basic post-lexical processes such as parsing sentences

Two emerging themes then...One is *learner populations*

- One would be: Second language learners
- From countries where the L2 they are reading now is not commonly used
- Have little experience using the L2
- ◉ Have a limited L2 vocabulary range
- ◉ Have limited automaticity in word recognition while reading (which will become a critical focus in this talk)

A second would be native users of a language...

- ...who, for whatever reasons, have not been reading and wish to read now.
- Their discourse communities may not read, their educational experiences may not emphasize reading, no books at home, genuine perceptual issues or processing issues.
- *Do* have decent working vocabulary range.....*but*
- I would bet they have limited automaticity in word recognition while reading, a lot like L2 learners.
- Also, not all L1 users are born equal in terms of sheer vocabulary range.

I will venture...

- That learners/readers of any population need comprehensible input/experience with texts and lots of it.
- That reading may be the one truly good source for language input and experience, not only for independent use but also for classroom use.
- Meaning: The best way to learn to read is to read.

If reading is to be a source of language input and experience

- Then reading fluency must take a front and center role in language programs.
- Why?
- Well, learners need to comprehend what they read, right? (if they do not, I can guarantee they will not read)
- If readers are not fluent readers, they do not comprehend texts.
- We need to understand what *reading fluency* is.

Some folk beliefs about language fluency

- Fluency and accuracy are just tradeoffs, right? Just like speaking activities, right? Well, I want my students to be accurate. That is more important.
- What if I want my students to read slowly and carefully (accurately) so I can introduce new grammar and vocabulary, and make sure they do well on tests?
- Students can learn to read (build fluency) on their own.
- Fluency just means someone is good at language, they're just born with that. It's luck, or natural talent.
- Being fluent is not as good as learning a language through effort and achievement on tests and assignments.
- Beliefs held by learners, teachers, administrators, parents

And now a view based on decades of applied research

- Fluent readers have good lower-order comprehension processing. They can identify words and parse sentences efficiently and effortlessly.
- Important enough to repeat! Their word recognition skills are *fast and accurate*.
- Fluent readers can use higher-order comprehension processing as well, making inferences and monitoring comprehension.
- If large amounts of attentional resources are used by readers to struggle with lower-order comprehension processes, then they cannot invoke higher-order processes.

“Attentional Resources”?



- Attentional resources are how well we can pay attention to multiple mental tasks at one time.
- Attentional resources are limited. There are hard limits for all people on all human activities.
- Attentional resources are “working memory.” (Just & Carpenter, 1992; Berry et al, 2009)
- Working memory is strongly implicated in reading (Maehara et al, 2007)

Working memory (one view)

“THE BLACKBOARD”

- How much information a person can remember at one time while not doing anything.
- For many, this would be seven digits of numbers for example, as in 5830210.
- We are born with blackboards of particular sizes, and this varies between individuals.
- We cannot change its size.

“PROCESSING CAPACITY”

- How well we can do a task (such as reading) with the information we hold in our “blackboards.”
- Meaning: Doing complicated stuff such as L2 word recognition, etc. at the same time *new* information is coming in.
- If processing capacity is limited (poor word recognition, for example), working memory gets overwhelmed.

When you “give up” on a text

- Or when you see a *learner* “give up”
- When you see furrowed brows, comprehension questions answered incorrectly, eyes darting back to earlier parts of a sentence, etc.
- Working memory has gotten overwhelmed.
- So many attentional resources have gotten eaten up by slow, inefficient word recognition processes that comprehension breaks down.

A race against time and capacity – examples – and these are just single sentences, not whole texts


- The fact that readers of another culture and language's literature may have difficulties processing both linguistically and culturally is not of course an argument for not using such texts at all.
- Most adults are pretty good at this task, and they use the same strategy: they start by drawing the outlines of the figure, then fill in the detail.
- You're always telling me to be grateful for stuff, and I'm grateful for this lemonade in my mouth and the hot sun on my face.

Brain break--Ahhhhhh



Strength within our constraints?

- Working memory “black board”
- We cannot do anything about the size of the blackboard.
- As teachers we have no way to intervene with *that*.
- Working memory processing capacity
- Now THAT we can do something about as learners and as teachers.
- This is where reading fluency training comes in.



More attention paid in the past three decades to lower-order comprehension processing

- Despite years of research and practice on enhancing higher order comprehension processes, learners/readers still find reading painful and laborious.
- In other words, many learners remain non-fluent readers.
- None of the pre-reading activities, and “tap into background knowledge” tasks will help if learners’ lower-order word identification processes remain undeveloped.

続ける つづける tsuzukeru

- One cause of this continued slow, effortful reading may lie in the underdeveloped word recognition skills of readers, where readers access word pronunciation and meaning from texts.
- Reading fluency, defined by Samuels (2006, p. 9) as “the ability to decode and comprehend text at the same time” is critical to successful reading.
- Here we are with **attentional resources** (working memory) again.

I suggest audio supported **repeated reading** to develop reading fluency

- RR is the practical expression of Automaticity Theory (Samuels, 1994).
- To engage in complex processes of reading, some of it has to be automatized or executed without learners having to pay much attention to it.
- RR in particular seems to work on word recognition processes, and helps to develop it.

RR: What does it look like?

- A typical RR session takes 25 minutes. It is methodologically simple.
- 1. Learners read an approximately 500-word segment of a text silently.
- 2. Learners then read a second time and then a third time while listening to it on an audio tape or being read aloud by a teacher or tutor.
- 3. Learners finally read a fourth and a fifth time.

What does 500 words look like?

Here is 309 words

On his second trip to the employee parking lot, Ababio saw some people he knew. They were waiting for the shuttle bus. The shuttle bus stop had a kind of umbrella over it. Today, everyone stood under it. It was only 8 AM. But the early September sun was already hot. This was Ababio's third summer in Texas. Summers were hot and bright. The heat stayed. It was like Ghana. He didn't mind. But for his airport friends from China, it was different. It was just too hot for them. One of them, Wei Zhang, turned pink in the heat. Outside, he had to wipe his face with a towel all the time. Inside, with air conditioning, he was better.

Wei Zhang worked at a massage spa in the airport. He was a young guy. He spoke little English. Last week he showed Ababio a white card. The white card had all the English he knew. The card said, "Soft or hard?" and "Is that sore?" and "Everything okay?" and "Okay done now." Wei Zhang got the card from his massage school in California. "Soft or hard?" meant "Do you want a soft massage? Or do you want a hard massage?" "Is that sore?" was supposed to be used if a customer said "Ow!" or "That hurt!" And, in the massage spa business, it was important to ask customers "Is everything okay?"

Ababio took the card and added a few sentences for Wei Zhang to try. One was "How's it going?" Another was "Wow it's really hot today, isn't it?" Ababio's favorite was "See you next time." When Wei Zhang got on shuttle bus #36 this morning, he said to Ababio "How's it going?" "It's going good man!" Ababio said. He gave Wei Zhang a big grin. Wei Zhang wiped his face with his white towel and sat down.

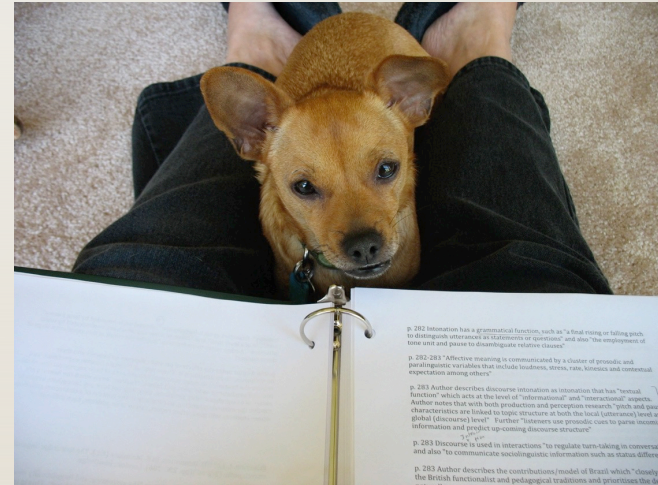
Source

- *Newcomers*
- 2023
- Gemma Open Door
- www.gemmamedia.org



For fluency training, essential to use short, easy texts (not single sentences)

- 300-500 words with fewer than five unknown words
- Graded readers are good courses for a program of RR treatments





Many sources for graded readers and easy texts

- <https://gemmamedia.org/hilo/>
- <https://wayzgoosepress.com/greta-gorsuch/>
- <http://erfoundation.org>

When using a graded reader or easy text

- Cut apart longer stories at discursively relevant places so you have successive sections of 300-500 words—or less, as long as the text you work with is discursively coherent.
- Do one full RR treatment of discursively text in one class. Do not assume learners are not capable of working with a longer text of 300 words.
- Do a second RR treatment of the next 300-500 word text in the next class.

Independent readers can read language and culture better



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Thanks very much, and take care
of yourselves

