

Comprehension Support for English Language Learners Using the Read Naturally Strategy

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In recent years, we have begun to understand fluency as a dynamic skill influenced by a variety of factors. Fluent readers are accurate and automatic as they recognize or decode words correctly. Fluent readers also have a good reading rate; that is, they show appropriate speed and fluidity as they move through connected text. In addition, they read with prosody—an expressive reading of the text that reflects an understanding of what they are reading. We know that fluency is a contributor to comprehension, but it has also been shown that fluency and comprehension have a reciprocal relationship and that each fosters the other (Stecker, Roser, & Martinez, 1998; Torgesen & Hudson, 2006; Torgesen, Rashotte, & Alexander, 2001). This reciprocal relationship between reading comprehension and fluency suggests that fluent reading is influenced by the reader's meaning-making abilities. Recent research with English language learners (ELLs) and English-speaking students seems to indicate that students who are able to comprehend what they read will generally be able to read more fluently, while students who have difficulties constructing meaning when reading might also have difficulties with fluency (Barth, Catts, & Anthony, 2009; Geva & Yaghoub-Zadeh, 2006; Klaua & Guthrie, 2008). This dynamic relationship between fluency and reading comprehension is relevant to the fluency development of all students, but it is critical in the case of ELLs who are faced with the challenge of developing reading skills in a language in which they are not yet proficient (Geva & Yaghoub-Zadeh, 2006).

There are a number of factors related to reading comprehension that affect fluency and that support the idea that these two skills are intrinsically related. These factors include the ability to construct overall meaning and to use context to identify and understand words and, therefore, read more efficiently.

Students with effective reading comprehension are good at constructing overall meaning as they read because they typically have a large vocabulary and broad background knowledge. Having a well-developed vocabulary makes it possible for readers to identify word meanings more rapidly and construct meaning more efficiently. A broad background knowledge also helps students construct meaning more effectively by enabling them to connect the information presented in the text to their diverse and relevant background experiences. The speed with which a reader

identifies word meanings when reading, in conjunction with the ease with which the reader constructs overall meaning, will influence reading fluency, especially when students know they need to understand what they are reading to answer questions or respond to the text. Students might intentionally or unintentionally pause or adjust their speed while reading in order to reflect on or make sense of what has been read up to that point (Barth et al., 2009; Geva & Yaghoub-Zadeh, 2006; Torgesen & Hudson, 2006).

Students' ability to use context when reading is another important factor related to reading comprehension that influences fluency. Research has shown that context supports word reading fluency and accuracy because words are consistently read faster and more accurately when they occur in a meaningful context than when read in isolated word lists (Jenkins, Fuchs, van den Broek, Espin, & Deno, 2003; Stanovich, 1980). Readers with a broad background knowledge base might have an easier time constructing meaningful contexts they can use to support word recognition and their understanding of what they are reading. However, creating a meaningful context is not always easy for every student, especially ELLs, because texts do not always present familiar contexts or situations that all students can identify with and understand.

This bidirectional and reciprocal relationship between fluency and reading comprehension points to the critical need to involve reading comprehension in the establishment and development of reading fluency. This is especially important for ELLs who are developing reading skills in English at the same time they are learning the new language while immersed in a new culture (Gersten, 1996). Fluency instruction for ELLs should be characterized by a focus on meaning, and significant efforts should be made to help ELLs comprehend the texts they are reading.

Educators interested in the academic achievement of ELLs have long proposed strategies that contextualize instruction and focus on meaning making and English language comprehension. Effective instruction for ELLs is based on the understanding that these students' English skills and vocabulary might not be fully developed and that their background knowledge might differ from the content and ideas that are present in school texts. Research has shown that effective instruction for ELLs develops students' background knowledge, utilizes native language appropriately, teaches key vocabulary terms in advance, uses visuals when necessary, and ensures that ELLs do not work in a meaningless context (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Gersten & Baker, 2000; Gersten & Geva, 2003; Goldenberg, 2008; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005).

When ELLs are developing fluency skills in English, they will greatly benefit from instruction that attends to the background, vocabulary, and language knowledge that they might need in order to understand the texts used in reading instruction.

To support comprehension for Spanish-speaking ELLs, Read Naturally Live, Read Live's reading intervention program, includes an optional step in some levels. As ELLs work to develop reading fluency in English, they listen to (and perhaps read along with) a Spanish translation of the text. ELLs can complete the cold read of the selected story in English and then read along with or listen to an audio recording of the carefully translated Spanish version of the story before beginning the Read Along and Practice steps in English. This way, Spanish-speaking ELLs have the opportunity to develop an understanding of the story by building some background and vocabulary knowledge before continuing with the rest of the steps in English.

While these Spanish versions of the stories can provide valuable cognitive and linguistic support to ELLs as they practice their oral reading fluency, exposure to the Spanish translation will not guarantee full comprehension of the English texts. We cannot assume that because ELLs have access to a Spanish version of the story, they will immediately understand content-specific terms or complex Spanish language structures. Comprehension requires more than just reading with and/or listening to a Spanish translation. So, it is important to verify understanding of the Spanish and/or English texts and, if necessary, to clarify meaning and teach content-specific terms to help ELLs develop their ability to read and comprehend in English.

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