USING DIGITAL TEXTS TO PROMOTE FLUENT READING

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As technology and the Internet continue to change how students learn and develop, educators have the opportunity to access digital texts via the Internet to supplement reading instruction. Moreover, reading instruction that incorporates digital texts can serve to motivate students to want to read and help increase students’ reading fluency in the classroom today.

Digital texts can be easily accessed on desktop, laptop, or handheld computers as well as electronic tablets such as the Kindle, iPad, and Nook, which, according to Larson (2007), are preferable over computers because of their size and portability. The unique medium and scalability of digital texts offers a different literacy avenue for readers, which, in itself, can motivate students to want to read. Students are able to manipulate font size, dictionary usage, text-to-speech features, and note-taking faculties (Larson, 2010). The individual manipulation of these features affords students some autonomy or self-regulation in the learning process, factors that can serve to motivate and strongly influence a student’s reading success (Schunk, 2001).

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Digital texts can increase the reading proficiency of students by assisting them in reading more fluently, a key skill of adept readers (Allington, 2012). More than just being a skill that students must master during their reading development, fluency is a bridge between a student’s ability to decode words and comprehend text (Pikulski & Chard, 2005).

Looking more specifically at the three common elements of fluency, accuracy refers to the ability to decode words correctly, automaticity is the speed or ability to read words and connected text automatically, and prosody refers to the rhythm and tone one exhibits when reading orally (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Taking these definitions into consideration, a teacher can easily identify fluent and dysfluent readers by listening to students read aloud. Fluent readers have a tendency to use voice inflections of various pitches and tones. They can also efficiently read through connected text in a fluid, swift manner, free of many errors; however, a dysfluent reader may read more laboriously. In a connected text, this reader may read in a monotone voice at a conscientiously slow pace, which can significantly interfere with their reading process, comprehension, and motivation to read at all.

When improving the accuracy, rate, and prosodic features of fluency, it is important to provide students with engaging instructional methods and strategies on a daily basis (Reutzel & Cooter, 2003). In this article, we discuss techniques to use with digital texts in motivating and further developing fluent, primary, and intermediate grade-level readers. Specifically, we offer suggestions on how to incorporate digital texts that are read aloud and in the form of Readers Theatre scripts into the teacher’s literacy routines to build and support students’ fluency competencies. We also provide a table with additional websites that can be used for fluency development.

Read-Alouds—Cyber Models
Exposing students to rich and varied fluent models during read-alouds is a beneficial strategy to support reading fluency development (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2010). Daily exposure to read-alouds presents students with opportunities to hear explicit modeling of the fluency elements (e.g., accuracy, automaticity, prosody) that proficient readers exhibit. In addition, reading aloud provides opportunities to introduce different genres, titles, and authors, which can ignite students’ reading motivation and lead them to read a wider range of material (Miller, 2002).

Featuring well-known actors and actresses such as Elijah Wood, Haylie Duff, and Amanda Bynes who read aloud children’s stories, the Screen Actors Guild Association BookPALS sponsors Storyline Online (www.storylineonline.net), an online streaming video program. The books offered on Storyline Online consist of only picture books; examples of some stories read aloud include Gene Zion’s *Harry the Dirty Dog* and Evelyn Coleman’s *To Be a Drum*. While the book is read, its illustrations and text are displayed.

The following are suggestions on how to use Storyline Online in the classroom for fluency development.

The first set of suggestions is applicable
during literacy centers where students navigate the website independently or in small groups. The next two sets of suggestions, prereading preparation and prosodic comparisons, are for whole- or small-group instruction in which the teacher guides students through the website.

**Literacy Centers**

While the teacher is conducting guided reading sessions, one literacy center can use the Storyline Online website to listen to teacher-assigned or student-selected digital texts, with the latter increasing a student’s sense of autonomy. The site is quite easy to navigate, with the title of the books displayed on the left side of the screen; children can simply click the triangle for “play” to start the read-aloud. Students can also use headphones so the audio does not disturb other students.

If enough computers or handheld tablets are available in the literacy center, each student can work on their fluency independently. By silently reading along with the captions while listening or conducting repeated readings of the same book, text-level automaticity increases (Rasinski, 1990). For students who may need to listen to themselves read, whisper phones can also be provided. To make whisper phones, cut approximately 6 inches of PVC pipe and attach both ends to a 90-degree elbow (also PVC).

For classrooms in which only one computer is available, the students in the center can simply listen to and then conduct choral readings of the same read-aloud.

Another option for using the online streaming video program during literacy centers is to project the Storyline Online link onto a dry-erase board or plain, white wall using an LCD projector. Using the enlarged image, students can choose to participate in paired reading exercises, choral readings, reading-while-listening, or repeated readings.

**Prereading Preparation**

Before hearing the read-aloud, each celebrity briefly introduces himself or herself and the book. Some of the celebrities, such as Sean Astin and Bradley Whitford, either ask questions pertaining to the book or provide props that are significant to the story’s plot.

At this point in the read-aloud, the teacher can pause the video and activate students’ background knowledge by facilitating a discussion about the questions and props in relation to the story. This discussion can assist in fluency development because students have been exposed to and can anticipate reading text with similar ideas, concepts, and vocabulary displayed through the captions on the bottom of the screen.

**Prosodic Comparisons**

For prosody practice, students can listen specifically for the prosodic features exhibited by each celebrity. (Keep the captions turned off so the students can focus on the tone, pitch, volume, and expression.) One of the nice features of using a digital text for read-aloud purposes over traditional read-alouds is that when students evaluate the expression of the reader, the teacher can stop and replay the exact same reading patterns each time.

First, the teacher should conduct a few lessons on the characteristics of prosody and the importance of it in reading fluently. Then, either in small groups or as a class, students can listen to two different celebrities as they read aloud. As each celebrity reads, students can fill in a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the prosodic features of the celebrities. Next, the teacher should confer with the students about the information written in their graphic organizer and allow students to vote on the celebrity they enjoyed the most, providing reasons to justify their decision.

This activity can be followed with further student modeling of fluent and dysfluent reading by selecting a digital text from one of the websites provided in the Table to review the characteristics of prosody.

**Readers Theatre—Virtually Dramatic**

Readers Theatre, yet another text that can be found in digital format, involves a dramatic performance of a written script without the use of memorization or elaborate props, costumes, special lighting, or acting (Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005). Some genres that are conducive to performance include poems, songs, rhymes, dialogues, and letters (Rasinski, 2006). Readers Theatre allows each student to have a role in a particular script, practice the role with others who have the same script, and perform the script in front of an audience, which usually consists of peers in the classroom, but can involve larger audiences such as parents or other grade levels.

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www.reading.org
This authentic approach to reading instruction motivates students to conduct repeated readings of their part in the script, thus developing accuracy and automaticity. Students can also be motivated to want to read well, as they have autonomy in how they present their roles and are held accountable to their peers to learn their lines so that they can adequately carry out their roles during the performance. Furthermore, Readers Theatre encourages students to focus on prosody because reading their lines with meaningful expression helps the audience to further understand the story.

The following suggestions on how to use Readers Theatre digital text for fluency development require the teacher to have at least four iPads in the classroom at a time and would be applicable for a literacy center while the teacher is meeting with a small group of students. Using these state-of-the-art devices to display the Readers Theatre scripts as digital text can be yet another means to motivate students to read.

1. The teacher selects online Readers Theatre scripts with two to four roles so that each student is able to read from a separate iPad. (Also, the students or teacher could create their own Readers Theatre scripts and save them as digital texts.) The following websites include free scripts with few roles:
   - [www.gigglepoetry.com/poetrytheater.aspx](http://www.gigglepoetry.com/poetrytheater.aspx)
   - [www.readerstheatre.ecsd.net/collection.htm](http://www.readerstheatre.ecsd.net/collection.htm)
   - [www.poetryteachers.com/poetrytheater/delaybedtime.html](http://www.poetryteachers.com/poetrytheater/delaybedtime.html)
   - [aaronshep.com/rt/RTE34.html](http://aaronshep.com/rt/RTE34.html)

2. After choosing a script for a particular group, the teacher can save it in a Microsoft Word document format. It may be helpful for later retrieval to name the document with the names of the students assigned to a specific script.

3. Because scripts can be downloaded and pasted into a Word document, they can be manipulated or modified to meet the students’ needs. For example, the teacher can enlarge the font or create more “white” space to decrease the amount of font on each page to improve its readability.

4. The teacher can also personalize the script by replacing each character’s name with the name of the student who will play that particular role. For example, if Jalisa is playing the role of Narrator 1, the teacher can find and replace “Narrator 1” for “Jalisa.”

5. Each script can be saved in Dropbox ([www.dropbox.com](http://www.dropbox.com)), a free service that allows users to share files across the Internet. (Dropbox should be installed, using the same e-mail address and password, onto the laptop or desktop and iPads.) Once the script is saved in Dropbox, it is saved to all of the teacher’s computers and iPads. Students can then open the Dropbox application on the iPads, find the
files with their names, and open their scripts.

6. After students have practiced reading their scripts several times, they can use one iPad to record their performance using the camera function. Students simply tap on the camera icon, tap on the “record” button at the bottom of the screen to start recording, and then tap on the “record” button again to stop recording. Students can then view their recording to note their accuracy, automaticity, and prosody displayed in the performance and discuss what fluency features could be improved for the actual performance in front of their peers.

7. If an extra iPad is available, students can further enhance their performance by recording sound effects. Using the camera function as indicated above, students can record individual sound effects saved in separate files, and an audience member can play certain sound effects during the performance.

Enhanced Learning on the Digital Horizon

Living in a digitalized world calls for educators to reconsider nontraditional means of teaching reading. Digital texts accessed through computers or electronic tablets such as the iPad offer an appealing medium of reading text that can motivate students to want to read. Incorporating fluency lessons using digital texts, such as listening to read-alouds and performing Readers Theatre, can strengthen students’ accuracy, automaticity, and prosody skills. In turn, as students’ reading fluency improves, their comprehension is also likely to improve, thus furthering their reading enjoyment and positively affecting students’ reading dispositions and personas (Larson, 2010).

REFERENCES


