

Don't Speed. **READ!**

Michael F. Opitz



NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • AUCKLAND • SYDNEY
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For Sheryl
This is what I did about it!

Acknowledgments

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Define Fluency

Consider these children. They each have their own way of reading, regardless of whether they are reading silently or orally:

Michael reads a text as quickly as possible.

Sheryl reads a text paying close attention to every word to pronounce each one correctly.

Roland reads a text with expression.

Are any of them fluent readers? The answer depends on how you define reading fluency. If you think of reading fluency as reading quickly, then you would conclude that Michael is a fluent reader. If you believe that accuracy is important, then you would most likely conclude that Sheryl is a good reader. Then there's Roland. If you equate reading with expression with fluent reading, then you would agree that Roland is a fluent reader.

But what if you believe none of the above? What if you believe that fluency consists of reading with appropriate speed, accurate word reading, and prosody (i.e., reading with expression by using intonation, stress, tempo, and phrasing) for the sake of better understanding the text when reading silently and helping listeners comprehend when reading orally? You would conclude none of the three is fluent because not one of them is exhibiting all three components of reading fluency as you've defined it.

My point here is that the definition we choose influences both the assessment and instruction we provide students. It also guides us to or away from teaching strategies and commercially published instructional materials. For example, if you believe that fluency can be defined as speed, you would emphasize speed when teaching students about fluency and you would purchase programs that measure students' words per minute to track their progress. The more words read per minute, the greater the reading progress. If you believe that fluency consists of speed and accuracy, you would emphasize both in your instruction and be inclined to use programs that do the same. If you believe that speed, accuracy, and prosody are all parts of fluency, you would address all three in your instruction and use programs that emphasize all three. And finally, if you believe that comprehension is an important element, you would emphasize it as well. Being aware of your definition, then, is a good first step toward providing smart and sensible fluency instruction.

It seems so easy, doesn't it? So why isn't it? Reflecting on my own teaching experi-

ences and my professional reading, leads me to think that there are three good reasons. First, as teachers we are too busy preparing to think about much else. We are in survival mode. All we know is that we want the children to grow as readers and we do what we think is best to enable this growth to happen. If someone were to ask us *why* we were doing *what* we were doing, more often than not we would not have a definitive answer. Instead, we might offer comments such as, “The children seem to do well with this activity” or “I’ve seen tremendous reading gains when I have children do this activity.” Later on, if we take the time to think about the question, perhaps as we’re driving home from school, we would be able to articulate why we do what we do.

Not only are we trying to survive the demands of the classroom, we are also trying to survive the numerous imposed mandates, which include new programs and their accompanying consultants, no recess breaks for children and teachers alike, and countless accountability measures, many of which do not even seem relevant to informing classroom instruction. Little time is left for actually thinking through the philosophical premises behind such mandates. Yet taking time to think about instruction is exactly what we need to do if we truly want to advance students’ reading ability. Being aware of instructional practices and the goals behind them is one characteristic of teachers whose students demonstrate high achievement (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998).

A second reason that defining fluency can be difficult is that there are so many proposed definitions and so little consensus in the professional literature. Some define it as being able to read quickly, accurately, and with proper expression, as do the authors of the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Schwanenflugel, Kuhn, Strauss, and Morris (2006) note that “there is general agreement that fluent reading incorporates the ability to read quickly, accurately, and when oral reading is considered, with expression” (p. 496). So according to them, readers only read with expression when they read aloud; they do not use expression when reading silently. Still others include comprehension in the definition (Johns & Bergland, 2006; Pikulski, 2006). And finally, there are those such as Duffy (2003), who equate reading fluency with oral language. In his words, “Fluency, whether in oral or silent reading, is ‘reading like you talk’” (p. 201).

To add to the confusion, some change their definition depending on the context. For example, when investigating repeated reading, Samuels (1979) defines fluency as being able to read with word recognition accuracy and speed. But in a discussion of his theory of automaticity (2006), he defines fluency as “the ability to decode and comprehend at the same time” (p. 39).

Another reason that defining fluency seems difficult is that some authors of professional publications use the word without explicitly defining it, leaving the reader to

make some inferences about the proposed definition. For example, in a recent publication, Winn, Skinner, Oliver, Hale, and Ziegler (2006) note, “Fluent reading involves rapid and accurate reading” (p. 196). This statement leaves the reader to wonder what else might be involved in fluent reading and whether the authors are going to consider all that might be involved or only the two factors they mention. Further reading leads the reader to infer that the authors define fluent reading specifically as reading rapidly with accuracy.

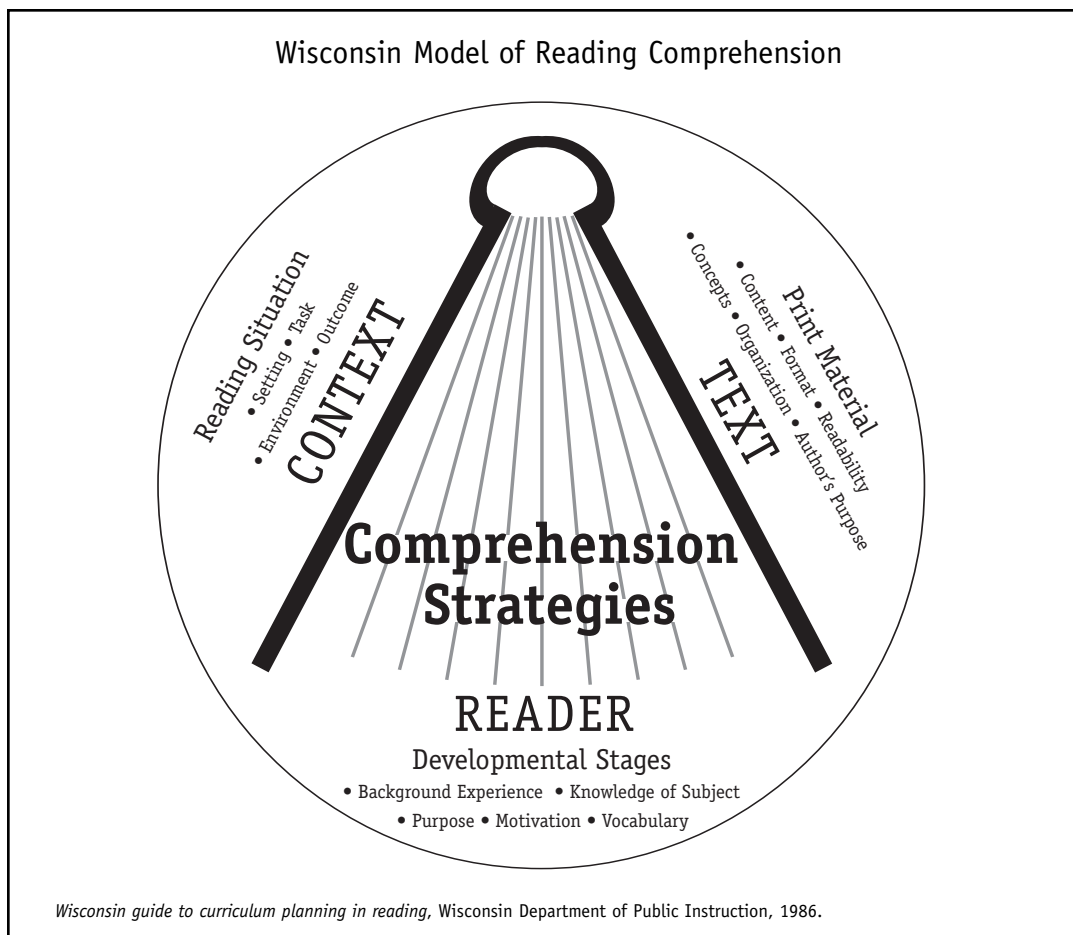
The professional literature often leaves us with different ideas about what constitutes reading fluency. We become more confused instead of clearer. We feel left on our own to figure out for ourselves what it means to be a fluent reader and just how important, or not, fluency is to reading comprehension, the essence of reading. This is not all bad, for thinking through ideas leads to greater understanding. Wrestling with the different ideas about fluency, for example, helps you become more clear and purposeful. You know what you believe, and you can articulate your beliefs with supporting evidence from your own teaching experiences, your experiences as a reader, and professional readings. You exude confidence and professionalism.

Many times, it is our desire to be better teachers that sends us on a journey to better understand an instructional practice. In fact, my guess is that the reason you are reading this book right now is that you want to better understand the contributions that fluency might play in your quest to help your students become better readers. In terms of working through your understanding of reading fluency and coming to terms with a definition, think how valuable your newer knowledge is to the children you teach! You will be more likely to exhibit many of the characteristics associated with effective teachers, such as the ability to articulate the reasoning behind what you do (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-MacDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001).

Taken a step further, imagine a school staff that takes the time to develop a definition of fluency to which they all subscribe so that all children across the grades will understand how fluency fits into reading and all other modes of language. Imagine, too, what the children who do not get this kind of coherent instruction must experience. Just after they have learned from one teacher that fast reading is what matters most, they hear comments from another teacher such as “Slow down! Good readers don’t always read so quickly!” Children are left to themselves to puzzle out the importance of speed when reading. And some of them never do figure out how speed factors into reading, leaving them with grave misconceptions about what readers do in their everyday lives when they read many different kinds of texts.

Given all of this discussion about the importance of defining fluency, providing you with my definition seems appropriate. So what’s my definition of reading fluency? As a result of my professional reading, my teaching experiences at many different grade

FIGURE 1.1



levels, my experience as a parent, and my personal experiences with learning to read and how I now read, I see reading fluency as the ability to silently or orally read a text with appropriate speed, adjusting it as needed within a given text, with relative accuracy, and with appropriate phrasing, intonation, tempo, and expression (i.e., prosody). Fluency is a dynamic rather than static process. It fluctuates depending on factors such as the difficulty of the text, the topic of the text, the reading environment, and the reader's background for the text, interest in the text, and motivation. I agree with Samuels (2006) who notes, "Fluency is situational. This means that fluency is like happiness, in that we are not happy all the time, nor are we fluent all of the time" (p. 39). Figure 1.1 shows the many factors that contribute to successful reading and that impact fluency, a small part of the reading process.

What? No inclusion of comprehension in my definition? It's not a mistake; it is intentional. Comprehension is much more than speed, accuracy, and prosody, the three elements most often used to define reading fluency. Making comprehension an attribute of fluency would minimize its importance. Comprehension is the essence of reading rather than a subcategory of fluency. Can the development of speed, accuracy, and prosody enhance comprehension? There appears to be co-relational evidence to show that, yes, all three can enhance comprehension (see Kuhn & Stahl, 2000, for a review of these studies). But that's about all these elements can do. We know that these three elements are not required for reading comprehension because there are many readers who are able to read with comprehension yet read at a slow pace, do not read with 100 percent accuracy, and lack the elements of prosody. Likewise, there are those readers who can read with all three elements of fluency yet when asked what they have read can state little to nothing. Clearly, while we want to discuss fluency along with comprehension, we need to be careful that we do not oversimplify the interaction between fluency and comprehension. This interaction is anything but simple (Applegate, Quinn, & Applegate, 2004).

➔ REFLECTION ➔

Now that you have read about reading fluency, how would you define it? What would you use as evidence to support your definition? You might find the chart below to be of some help in thinking through your definition. On the left side, list the attributes that you believe contribute to reading fluency. On the right side, list the supporting evidence. Finally, summarize the attributes to create your definition of reading fluency.

DEFINING FLUENCY

<i>Attributes of Fluency</i>	<i>Supporting Evidence</i>

Summary Statement (your definition of reading fluency)