

STAFF FLUENCY TRAINING · SESSION 1

What fluency is, and why we teach it

Two children who can both read. Neither can tell you the story.
This session is about what is really going on, and why it is ours to
fix.

Two children who can both read

Priya

Reads at home because she wants to
Fast. I asked her to slow down
Skipped every full stop
Misread words she can read perfectly
well
Remembered a dog. There is no dog in
the story

Felix

Works harder at reading than Priya
does
Word perfect
Sounds out almost every word, most
behind his eyes
Each word is a small separate job
Nothing left at the end for what it said

Both met the phonics check threshold. Ask either family and you will be told their child can read.

From the outside, both look like the same thing: two children who read the words and did not understand the story. Both get filed under comprehension. Both get the same worksheet.

**This is not a matter of comprehension.
It is a matter of fluency.**

What fluency is

Reading fluency is the ability to read words **correctly**, to recognise them **without effort**, and to say them in the **groupings and with the emphasis** that carry the sense.

Accuracy

Reading the word on the page. Not a guess, not a near miss.

Automaticity

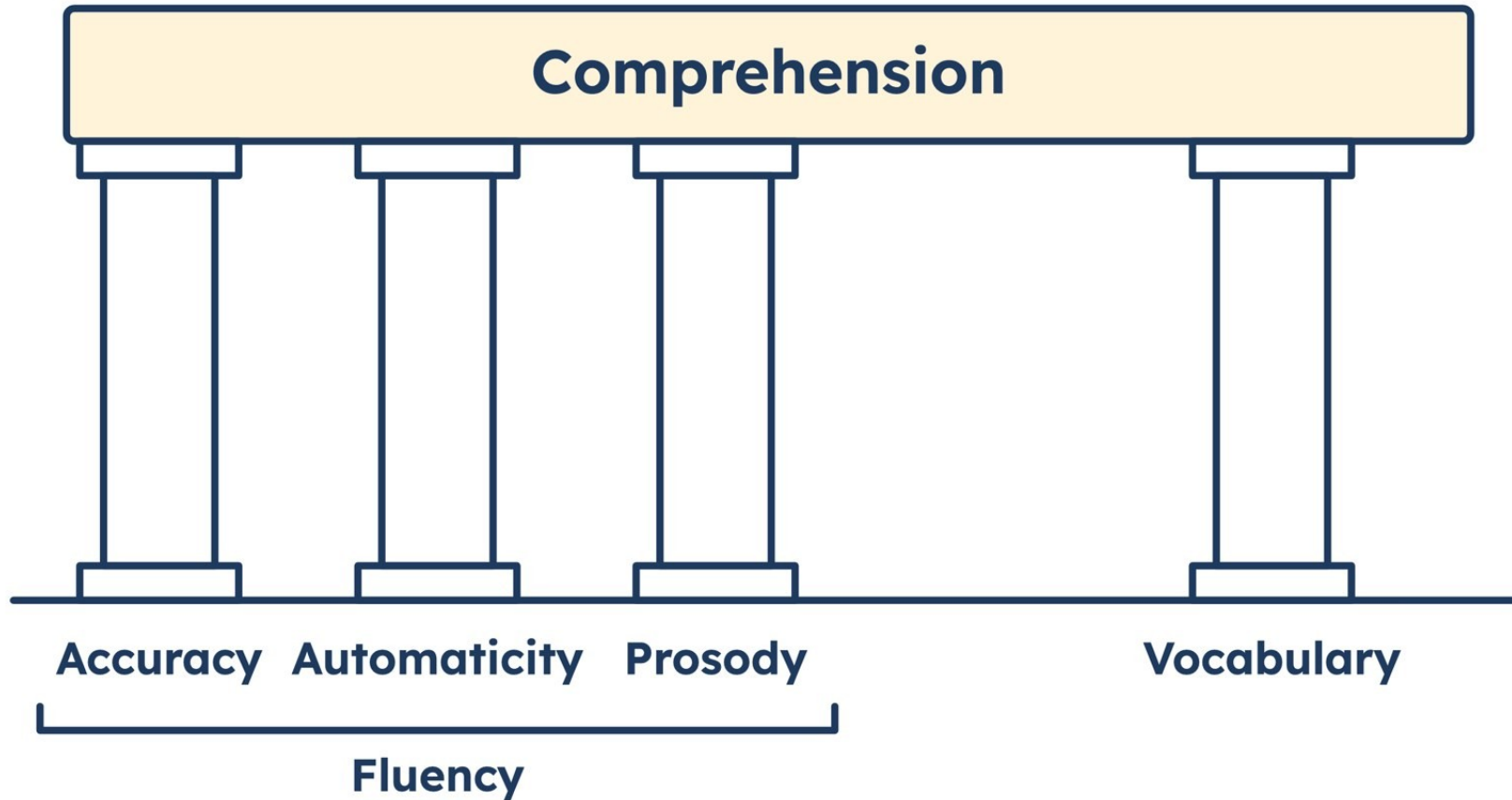
Recognising it on its own, before the child decides to do anything.

Prosody

The sound the words make: phrasing, emphasis, the rise and fall.

The settled definition since the National Reading Panel gathered the evidence in 2000. Almost nobody serious has argued with it since.

Three pillars, one more pillar, and a roof



Accuracy is the part we already teach

The child reads the word on the page. Not a word that starts the same way, not a good guess from the picture. The word.

A well-taught systematic phonics programme delivers this to the great majority of children. We are better at it than we have ever been.

Rasinski, 2004

THE WORKING NUMBERS

95%

About one error in twenty words. The level a child can learn from.

90%

Below this, the errors start changing what the sentences mean.

Automaticity is recognition that happens on its own.

You did not choose to read this sentence.

You looked at it and could not help it.

Attention is finite. Everything a child spends getting a word off the page is unavailable for everything else the sentence is asking of them.

Your first driving lesson

Steering straight. Checking the mirror. Finding, or crunching, the gear. Each one took your whole attention. You could not hold a conversation.

Conversation became available when the steering stopped demanding anything.

The sentence a child cannot think about is usually the sentence they are still steering.

Prosody is the sound the words make

Where the voice rises and falls. Which words take the weight. Where the reader breathes. How words gather into groups before they are said.

Written English leaves out almost everything speech carries for free. The reader has to put it back.

Understanding, performed

Deciding that into the garden belongs together as one piece is understanding.

A child who reads a sentence with the right shape is showing you they have worked out its structure. A child who reads it flat is showing you they have not.

So teach expression directly, and teach it out loud.

One sentence, four ways



1 Accuracy missing

2 Automaticity missing

3 Prosody missing

4 Fluent

Fluency is not something a child has or lacks

Hand anyone in this room a page of case law or the service manual for a boiler and their reading will slow, flatten and lose its shape inside a paragraph. Hand them a picture book and they are fluent again.

The text moved. They didn't.

So the useful sentence is not "Felix is a dysfluent reader". It is "Felix isn't yet automatic on texts at this level". That one tells you what to do on Monday.

A reader is doing two jobs from one pool of attention



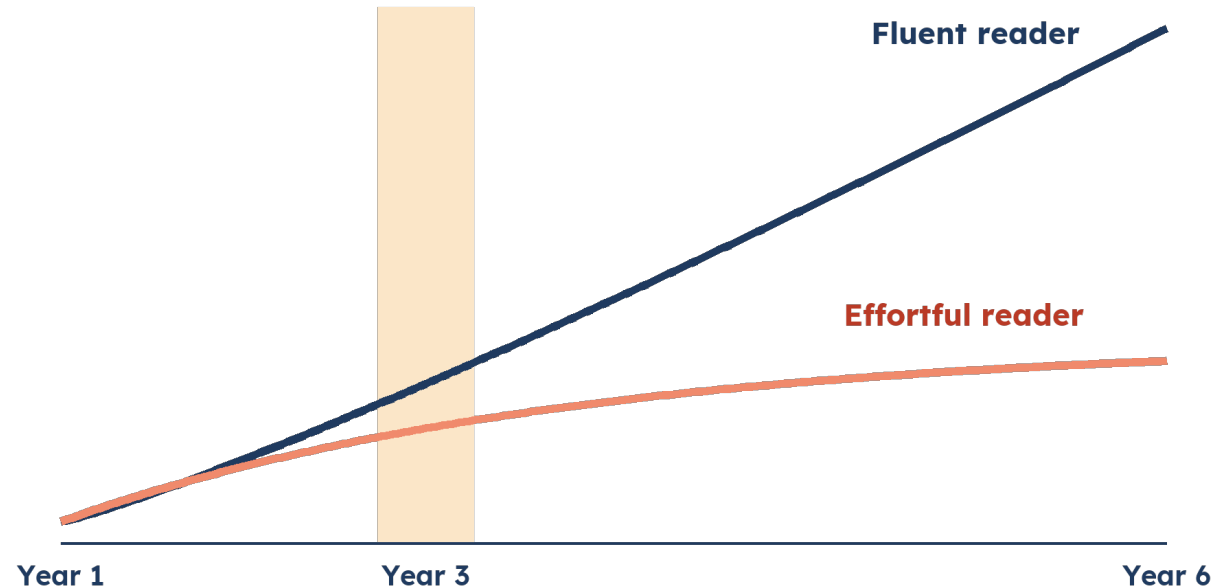
LaBerge and Samuels, 1974

The paper the whole of fluency research has stood on since. Nobody mentioned it in my teacher training, and I'd be surprised if they mentioned it in yours.

The Year 3 wall

Somewhere in the move from the infants to the juniors, everything gets harder at once:

- Books get longer, pictures thin out
- Sentences carry two ideas each
- Vocabulary turns academic: evaporation, peninsula, predator
- Print shrinks and packs tighter
- And reading teaching stops



Shape only. The lines diverge, the divergence speeds up, and it starts earlier than anyone notices.

What the effort crowds out

Comprehension

The attention the words take is subtracted from the attention the meaning gets. The child who gives most to the words understands the least, however hard she concentrates.

And concentrating harder is what she is already doing.

Knowledge

The vocabulary that will carry her comprehension at eleven is being laid down, or not laid down, through the texts she can or can't manage at eight.

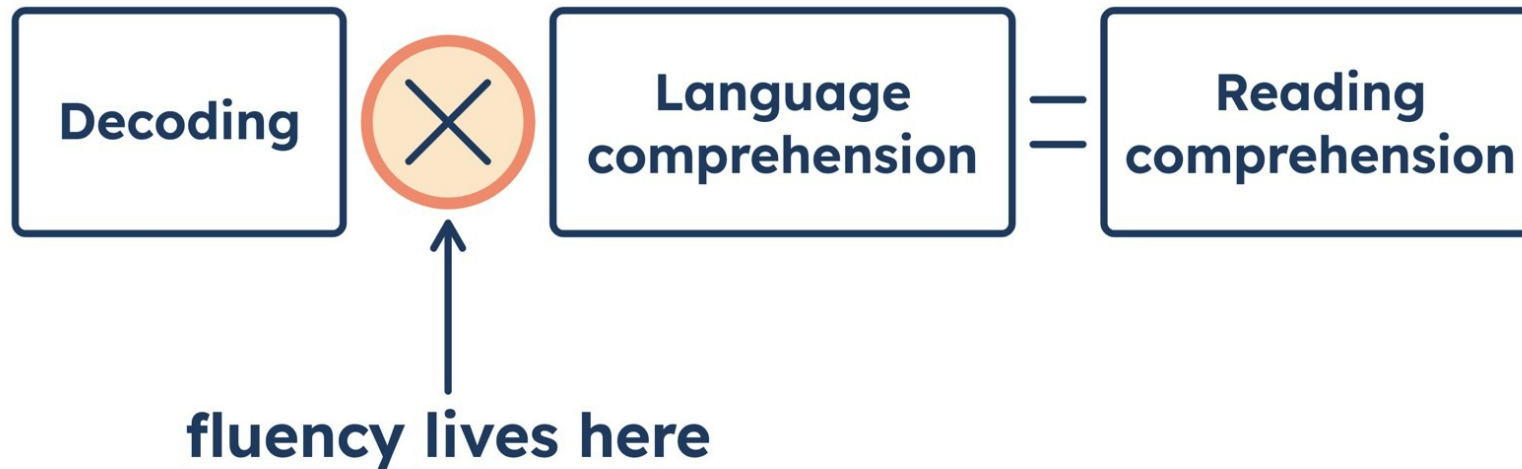
It shapes the reader she was going to become.

Love of reading

Look at who is curled up in the book corner at wet play. It will be the children who can already read. The child working twice as hard walks past it.

Fluency is the entry requirement nobody put on the poster.

You already know the Simple View of Reading. Where's fluency?



Gough and Tunmer, 1986. Scarborough's Reading Rope, 2001, writes the same thing in the small print: word recognition becomes "increasingly automatic".

Does teaching fluency actually move anything?

Herts for Learning, Key Stage 1

Around 600 children. In eight weeks: about a year and a half of comprehension age and eleven months of accuracy, on a standardised test.

National Reading Panel, 2000

Guided oral reading, an adult or stronger reader alongside the child, reading aloud and rereading, reliably moves word recognition, fluency and comprehension.

EEF and the Reading Framework

The EEF's Key Stage 1 literacy guidance puts fluency among its recommendations. The DfE's Reading Framework says weak fluency drags on comprehension across the curriculum.

The children who struggle most

Word-recognition and fluency difficulties may be the key concern for up to 90% of children with significant comprehension problems (Duke, Pressley and Hilden, 2004).

Fluency is not a rival to phonics

Phonics

Teaches the code, at word level, in a specified sequence. Excellent at laying the building blocks for accuracy.

Fluency work

Happens on connected text: passages, poems, sentences that go somewhere. Begins as decoding becomes secure and runs alongside.

Nothing asks you to slow the programme, dilute it or shorten it. It collects what phonics delivers and makes it easy. Phonics is NECESSARY but it is not SUFFICIENT.

Four things fluency is not

1 Fluency isn't speed

Speed is a symptom of automaticity, which is why we measure it. Chased for its own sake it takes accuracy and prosody down with it. Ask Priya.

2 Decoding doesn't deliver comprehension by itself

Decoding gets the words right. Something else has to make them cheap.

3 Silent reading doesn't build fluency

An effortful reader left alone with a book practises being effortful. Defend the time if you like. Just don't count it as fluency teaching.

4 Reading round the class builds little

No chance to prepare, a halting model for everyone listening, and half of them counting ahead to find their paragraph.

You have to listen to your children read to know how good a reader they are.



It takes time. It takes less time than you think. A whole class in an afternoon. Find out which of the three each child is weakest at. Then teach.

NEXT TIME

What we do about it

- Listening to a child read, and what to listen for
- Modelled reading, echo reading and choral reading
- Rereading that children want to do: the poem and the performance
- Where Felix and Priya go from here

One thing to try before then: this week, listen to one child read for a whole minute, and decide which of the three pillars is the weakest.