EFFECTIVE
TEACHING
AND LEARNING:
**DEVELOPMENT
PROJECT REPORT**

Oral reading fluency
for adults

Maxine Burton

National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

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NRDC

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This is one of several linked publications arising from the five Effective Practice Studies carried out by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) from 2003 to 2007. The five studies explored effective teaching and learning in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and using ICT.

NRDC has produced three series of publications from the Effective Practice Studies: the research reports, published in February 2007; the practitioner guides, published in partnership with NIACE in Autumn 2007; and the development project reports, published in Autumn 2007. For titles in the first two series, please see the back cover.

These development project reports focus on specific elements of effective classroom practice in these areas:
• Oral reading fluency in adults
• Collaborative writing
• 'Bestimation': Using basic calculators in the numeracy classroom
• Using voting technology for assessment
• Reflection and action in ESOL

Contents

Introduction

This paper reports on a small-scale pilot project on developing oral reading fluency, a teaching strategy rarely seen in any of the 59 adult literacy classes observed for the NRDC Effective Practice Study in reading (Brooks et al. 2007).

Research from the US (Kruidenier 2002) suggests that oral reading fluency is an effective strategy for adults and indeed it is widely used there both in schools and in adult education. Practice in this has been shown to assist reading comprehension and improve confidence. There seems, however, to be some reluctance on the part of teachers in England to put their adult learners under this kind of 'pressure', usually on the grounds that it might have inappropriate school connotations or simply be too embarrassing for them. In most cases, these fears proved unfounded, and the strategy turned out to be popular with both teachers and learners.

In this paper we describe:
• how the project was carried out
• methods and materials
• outcomes from the perspective of the teachers and learners.

'Oral reading fluency' means reading aloud to one or more people in a rapid, accurate and expressive way, with the momentum unbroken by the need to decode.

Our aims and methods

We wanted to introduce the strategy of oral reading fluency into a number of adult literacy classrooms during the autumn term of 2006 and ascertain its impact. This was done by recruiting adult literacy teachers, training them in the strategy and asking them to use it with their learners for a proportion of the class time each week. Class observations were carried out, weekly reports were sent in by the teachers, and monthly team meetings were held with all the teachers for feedback and discussion. At the end, evaluation questionnaires were completed by both teachers and learners. There was no formal assessment of the learners' progress.

The teachers and settings
Six adult literacy teachers were recruited in September 2006, four based in Sheffield, one in Leeds and one in Liverpool. One teacher worked in a LEA Adult Education Centre; the remaining settings were FE colleges. Their basic skills teaching experience covered a range from 3 to 25 years. Only one of the teachers had previously used the strategy on a regular basis.

The learners
Over 40 learners in 9 different classes were involved. Their ages ranged from 16 to 60 and the full range of ability levels, Entry level 1 to Level 2 (as reported by their teachers), was represented. The teachers chose which of their learners should participate, but these learners were fully consulted first about the project and about the strategy. Only one learner was reported as refusing to take part. Further characteristics of the 33 learners who completed feedback questionnaires are reported on page 11.

How to use oral reading fluency: a reference list of suggested methods and materials with guidelines

Paired reading	The learner reads with a teacher/assistant or another learner at a higher level. They start reading the text together until the learner signals that she/he is happy to read alone.	For a full account of this technique see: http://www.dundee.ac.uk/fedsoc/research/projects/trwresources/
Choral reading	A group version of the above. It takes pressure off the individual learner but there can be problems if people read at different speeds. An enlarged text with a pointer might resolve that difficulty.	Individual learners can signal that they wish to read alone; if they falter, the agreement (negotiated beforehand) is that everyone else will then join in again.
Repeated reading	The same passage is read again and again over the course of a few weeks so that faultless fluency is achieved. It is important not to underestimate the time required and not to move on to a	different text too soon. Also keep spare copies of passages for repeated reading for when they go missing or are left at home.
Modelled (echo) reading	Here the teacher reads aloud first and the learner repeats. Expressive modelling is important and should not be of too long a piece of text – no more	than a phrase or short sentence at a time.
Performance reading	Preparing for a 'performance' works particularly well with a play script, with learners taking the individual parts (and the teacher perhaps reading the stage directions). Reminding learners that professional actors do not always get it right and sometimes end up ad-libbing, can provide reassurance and indeed be	liberating and confidence-boosting. Arranging time for learners to practise together is also important.

Suggested materials

Film, TV and play scripts	Plays can be obtained for free (often with supporting teaching packs) from theatres. It is possible to download TV scripts (e.g. soaps such as *EastEnders*) and film scripts from	sites such as www.scriptcrawler.net and www.script-o-rama.com There are also short, simple plays available in the LIVEWIRE series published by Hodder Education.
Newspaper articles, including those in the *Metro* and other free local papers	Local and national interest articles lend themselves particularly well to class discussion with a wide range of learners before and during the reading. Long articles may require too much reading stamina for some	learners. Newsprint in justified columns can also be hard to read and can be adapted.
Books	The well-known Quick Reads series. Other suitable books can be found through First Choice Books (www.firstchoicebooks.org.uk) and	for easier books aimed at beginner readers see New Leaf: www.newleafbooks.org.uk (the successors to Gatehouse).
Audio books	These are available to accompany texts, such as New Leaf, and Clipper Emergent Reader Programme with Quick Reads www.wfhowes.co.uk/cerp. For further information see www.vitallink.org.uk. Recordings can provide useful extra practice. Some commercially-produced audio books	go too fast for emergent readers (although New Leaf CDs offer slower reading versions as well as faster listening speed ones). Teachers can also record short items at an appropriate level and speed for their learners.
Learners' own writing	This would provide a familiar text and could be used within a language experience approach (whereby learners are helped to transcribe	their own words). (New Leaf publishes books written by learners.)

Reading speed

If a learner reads too slowly, meaning will be lost. Timing a learner's reading and increasing the speed by restricting the time allowed for reading a particular text aloud is a suggestion from a useful American teaching manual by Susan McShane (2005), which devotes an entire chapter to 'Reading Fluency'. However this needs to be used with care as not all learners find this a helpful challenge. One of the teachers discovered that timed reading was particularly helpful with one learner and even helped to speed up his subsequent silent reading, but that it put other learners under too much pressure. This serves as a reminder, that whatever the technique being used, 'instructions' should not be followed too slavishly and should be adapted appropriately.

(See Chapter 5 of *Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers*. http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/html/mcshane/chapter5.html)

Reading fluency in action

Performance reading

The *Stand By Me* film script, (based on a Stephen King book) was downloaded free from the internet and successfully used with a group of five learners (Level 1–2) from a class of 16-19-year-olds. As a 'coming-of-age' story it seemed a particularly good choice.

They had practised over the previous weeks, and read with varying fluency, but with good expression and at times quite convincing delivery. They were very supportive of each other and peer correction took place spontaneously. The teacher made a recording of this 'performance read' with the learners' permission and then, at the request of one of the other learners in the class, played it back to the whole class afterwards. (Note: had there been enough film scripts available, this would have been an excellent opportunity for the whole class to have practice in following the text while listening to the recording.)

Reading a play script

An excellent integrated activity involved a visit to a local theatre to see a production of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, discussion of the play in class and performance reading of a three-page excerpt from the play script (obtained free from the theatre). One learner (Level 1) found the experience of reading aloud very upsetting as it evoked bad memories of school, but with teacher and peer support she achieved fluent and expressive reading.

Reading the play script inspired such enthusiasm amongst these learners that they suggested a 'drama group' could be set up in college.

Repeated reading

This was used by a teacher for a group of Entry level 1–3 learners. Suitable passages were selected in consultation with each learner and read several times, both silently and one-to-one with the teacher, culminating in a 'performance read'. The passages read by Entry level 1 learners were no more than six lines (maximum five words) and were in a large font and contained a picture illustration.

What we did

Phase 1: September to October 2006

At the first meeting with teachers in September 2006, we shared information and suggestions for suitable teaching methods and materials and discussed any reservations about giving adult learners practice in oral reading fluency. The first phase was a pilot stage. Teachers were encouraged to try out a range of methods and materials, and to report back briefly after each class on what they had done. All the suggested methods, except for reading along with audio books, were tried. At the second team meeting, the teachers' initial reactions to the strategy were noted and incorporated into guidelines on using oral reading fluency. They noted early on that:

- When the principles were explained the strategy was enthusiastically received by most learners.
- Any anticipated embarrassment about reading aloud turned out to be minimal in the majority of cases.
- It can encourage learner autonomy when learners correct each other, assign their own parts for script reading, etc.
- Fluency appeared to improve; words which had to be prompted on a first reading were remembered second time round; and when comprehension was checked that too seemed to improve.
- It provided a welcome opportunity to sit down with their learners.

Phase 2: November to December 2006

For their classes during November 2006, the teachers were asked to build on what they had learnt from the pilot trials and use the particular method(s) they thought would work with their learners for at least four consecutive sessions. They were asked to fill in more detailed report forms. These showed that the length of time devoted to reading fluency practice ranged from 10 minutes to 1 hour, representing proportions of class time varying from 7 per cent to 40 per cent (classes were of 2 or 2.5 hours' duration).

Observations of one session in each of six participating classes were carried out and observation notes taken of the reading fluency section. Where possible, the learners were asked informally about their experience of taking part in reading fluency. It was difficult to judge how relaxed the learners were about reading aloud, as being observed could have put them under additional pressure. The following behaviour was observed.

- In one class, the learners were all very keen to read to the observer and 'show off' their skills (in reading passages they had practised before).
- A class of 16- to 19-year-olds were reluctant to discuss their reading but showed obvious enthusiasm when doing their performance reading of a film script.
- In another class, the learners showed little apparent enthusiasm, and were also reluctant to talk about the experience of reading aloud. However, just as the observer was about to go, one learner actually volunteered to read out another passage (a familiar newspaper article) and seemed very proud of his achievement when he had reached the end.

At times, when reading was done without expression and there was no discussion or questions asked, it was difficult to judge the extent of comprehension.

Pride on the part of the learners in their achievement marked every instance of reading aloud.

Findings

What the teachers thought

At the final meeting at the end of November 2006, the teachers filled in a detailed questionnaire, evaluating their experience of using the strategy, the effect on their learners and their plans for the future. It is important to remember that the timescale was very short, seven weeks in all, with the first three weeks devoted to discussion with the learners and trying out different methods. The main questionnaire results were as follows.

- The effects on their learners overall were judged to be very positive with regard to their enjoyment and engagement in class, their confidence and their ability to work independently.
- Two teachers thought that learners' ability to read with fluency and expression, and reading more widely/for pleasure were unaffected; the others saw improvement.
- All but one considered that the strategy had an effect on comprehension.
- Three teachers felt that the benefits were attributable entirely, or almost entirely, to the strategy of reading aloud, three thought that the learners' informed participation in the project also played a part in their progress.
- All six teachers intend to continue to incorporate oral reading fluency into their classroom practice.

- The most popular methods were:
  - repeated reading aloud (with modelling by the teacher)
  - performance reading of plays (the choice of five teachers)
  - one teacher favoured paired reading in learner pairs.
- The most useful materials were:
  - Film/play scripts
  - newspaper articles.

Peer correction and support was regarded as effective and valuable but did not always take place spontaneously; reluctance may have been due to gender/age issues – younger learners were thought to be more prone to embarrassment – or other aspects of the classroom dynamic.

The teachers were asked if the strategy was unsuitable for any types of learners (and it is interesting that two of the teachers reported that they had used reading aloud before, primarily with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities learners). At the start there had been doubts about the suitability of some classes for this (e.g. large classes, multi-level, mixture of disabilities, etc). After trying it out, three teachers concluded it was suitable for all learners, provided they had been consulted beforehand and had agreed to it.

The teachers were also asked to consider any drawbacks and problems encountered. Two reported no real problems when using the strategy.

> The strategy proved suitable for a wider range than anticipated, and the teachers wished they had included more of their learners in the trial.

The others mentioned factors such as:

- Problems 'managing' the rest of the group when only some learners were reading aloud;
- Shortage of time to listen to everybody;
- Logistics – lack of space in the classroom for reading activities;
- Lack of interesting reading materials at Entry levels 1 and 2;
- Intermittent attendance making practising play script reading difficult;
- Classroom dynamic needing to be taken into consideration;
- It could provoke emotional traumas and crises of confidence in an important minority of cases. In such cases, using the strategy can involve an unreasonable element of 'risk-taking'. (However, for a striking example of risk-taking justified, see 'To Kill A Gremlin' in Burton 2007)

Their main advice to other teachers involved dialogue with the learners from the start:

- Be 'open and honest';
- Explain and negotiate so they are in control of the process as much as possible;
- Check what the learners feel 'comfortable' with;
- Be prepared to try different methods and activities.

When each teacher was asked to nominate one learner who had benefited most from practising oral reading fluency, some said they were 'spoilt for choice'. Their success stories included:

30-year-old female, currently Entry level 2. *'18 months ago CS was a non-reader, she couldn't always recognise her own name. She has grown the most in confidence of all my readers, is now reading fluently and with the correct intonation.'*

Male, early 60s, Entry level 2–3, who has *'increased self-confidence and motivation. He is a learner who has been coming to classes for several years and I feel this has rekindled his determination to succeed'.*

Female, 18-year-old, Level 1. *'She told me she never read books, but from reading the play, really wants to read the book. Her Support Plan states that she shouldn't be asked to read aloud but she had no problems with reading aloud, accepted peer support and appeared to enjoy it!'*

21-year-old female, Entry level 2. *'This student often "pretends" she has completed a task but the repeated reading brought her back to the same words which she has practised conscientiously. She enjoyed* reading a short tale to the group and leading the discussion. This has encouraged her to read the rest of the series.'

Learners of different ages and reading abilities seem to have benefited. One teacher, however, considered that learners around Entry level 3 gained the most.

> **Despite the teachers claiming that a one-to-one situation would be less threatening for their learners, over half the learners themselves seemed to find reading to a group no more of a problem than reading to one other person.**

What the learners thought

At the end of the reading fluency trials, the learners who had participated were asked to fill in a questionnaire, asking for some background information and about their experience of reading fluency in terms of confidence and reading habits. This questionnaire was administered in class by the teachers and had been devised in consultation with them.

A total of 33 completed forms were returned by learners, more than half of whom were women (21) and with an age range from 16 to 60. All but nine were white, and all but two had English as their first language. The full range of levels (as supplied by their teachers) from Entry level 1 to Level 2 was represented, with a fairly even split between numbers of those judged to be at Entry level 1–3 and Entry level 3 to Level 2. The completed questionnaires showed the following.

- More than half the learners (23) reported at least a small increase in confidence in reading aloud after taking part in the project. The rest reported no change except for two instances where there was an apparent decrease in confidence.
- Thirteen learners said they would be happier reading to one person than to a group. A small majority (19) reported the same level of confidence in reading to a group as to one other person. One learner claimed to feel more confident reading to a group.
- All but five (plus one 'don't know') said they would like to do more reading aloud.
- Reading for pleasure was reported as happening mainly 'sometimes' with nine reading 'often' and only one 'never'.
- Reading aloud outside class happened mainly 'never' (19) and 'sometimes' (11) but three learners reported doing it 'often'.

There seemed to be no correlations between the level of the learners or any other characteristics such as gender or ethnicity and either their confidence or frequency of reading practices.

Thus, although no formal evaluation was carried out, practice in oral reading fluency proved a popular strategy with nearly all the learners.

Conclusion

Oral reading fluency proved to be a popular strategy with both teachers and learners, increasing learner confidence, enjoyment and ability to work independently. It also had wider benefits which our teachers helped to identify. It provided:

• Valuable opportunities to focus on reading, with a dedicated time for each learner. Recent research (Besser et al. 2004, Brooks et al. 2007) has highlighted the fact that active reading tuition and focused reading instruction in general only take up a small proportion of class time.
• Opportunities to identify 'hidden problems'; to understand the area of difficulty and give immediate feedback. (Silent reading does not offer this insight.)
• 'An important part of the learner/tutor relationship'.
• The stimulation of 'taking risks' and providing new challenges.

Conclusions from a small-scale project can only be a starting point and our list of suggested methods and materials is by no means exhaustive. Further research, using other measures of assessment, must continue to build on these findings.

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Notes

Other publications from the NRDC Effective Practice Studies

The **research reports** – available in full or summary formats from **www.nrdc.org.uk/publications**

Effective teaching and learning: Reading
Effective teaching and learning: Writing
Effective teaching and learning: Numeracy
Effective teaching and learning: ESOL
Effective teaching and learning: Using ICT

The **practitioner guides** – available from **www.niace.org.uk/publications**

Developing adult teaching and learning: Practitioner guides - Reading
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