

Fluency Development through Poetry for Whole Class Instruction in Grade Four

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Fourth grade teacher Tammy Noska learned about the Fluency Development Lesson during her work as a reading clinician at the Kent State University Reading Clinic as part of her master's degree in reading requirements. She was impressed with how the use of the lesson changed the reading achievement trajectory for the students she tutored. The lesson was originally intended for work with small groups of students, especially those who struggle in reading. In the FDL, students are presented with a text, usually a poem, and over the course of the lesson practice it to the point where they can read it fluently. The practice involves listening to the teacher or other proficient reader read the text, reading the text multiple times as a group or with partners, students rehearsing on their own and at home, and eventually performing their text for an audience. Research has shown that the repeated reading practice not only leads to improvements on the texts read, but also generalized improvements in word recognition, fluency, and overall reading on new texts never before read by students. Moreover, students who struggle in reading are able to achieve a level of reading performance that is proficient and just as good as more proficient readers in the class – they feel success!

Based on the results she observed in her clinical work, Tammy and Gifted Education Specialist Chip Hawks collaborated to the FDL into her ELA instruction for all students in her classroom. Tammy and Chip worked collaboratively to fit the lesson to the needs of all the students in the classroom. Tammy was particularly interested, however, in how using the FDL in a whole-class lesson might help the 6 students were identified as struggling in reading.

In Tammy's class, students were introduced to 2-4 poems every week over a 7-week unit of study on poetry. The poems were chosen more on the basis of student interest and poetic quality, rather than mere difficulty. Some of the poems were relatively easy, others were more

challenging. Poems were chosen from online resources as well as from poetry collections in the classroom and school library. Each poetry practice (FDL) session lasted 10-20 during which students practiced their poem in the ways noted earlier. They were also encouraged to practice their poems at home with a family member. Poetry practice was followed up with discussion of poetry elements such as repetition, rhyme, rhyme scheme, alliteration, meter, free verse, etc. The poetry unit/FDL was fit into the existing reading program (Teachers College Unit of Study). No additional instructional time was given to the project beyond what was normally accorded for reading.

At the end of the 7 week unit, students performed a self-selected poem from the 22 that had been rehearsed and mastered over the course of the poetry unit. Parents, school and school district officials including the school superintendent, other classrooms, and others (e.g. Rasinski) were invited for the performance. Students also performed at an evening school board meeting. Chip Hawks arranged to have the performances recorded, using a camera, boom, microphones, and green screen in the school's video recording studio so that they could be played repeatedly. The students, along with Mr. Hawks, uploaded scenic backgrounds for the video recordings that reflected the meaning and theme of each poem that was performed. Overall, students found the poetry unit and the rehearsing and performing of poetry very engaging and authentic. According to Mr. Hawks, "It was apparent that the students were enthralled with the entire process of enhancing their fluency, video recording their performances of their poetry, and seeing the end results. It was rewarding especially to see how achieving the goal of improving fluency and appreciation of poetry could bolster students' self-confidence in themselves as readers."

Improving Reading Outcomes

Of central interest to Tammy was the effects of the FDL/Poetry program on the 6 students she felt were most at-risk for struggling in reading. She asked Kristin Garner, the school reading specialist, to monitor these students' progress. She assessed the students' foundational reading performance through an oral reading fluency probe (1 minute of reading grade level text and determining words read correctly per minute). On the pre-FDL probe (Sept 18) the 6 students averaged 60.5 wcpm on a 4th grade passage. This compares with

Hasbrouck and Tindal's (2017) 4th grade, autumn, 50th percentile norm of 94 wcpm. The post-FDL probe took place on Nov 13; students' performance improved to 76.3 wcpm, a gain of 15.8 wcpm in 8 weeks' time.

While a 15.8 wcpm gain may not seem large on first glance, this average gain was quite substantial. Dividing the 15.8 wcpm gain by the 8 weeks differential between pre- and post-testing indicates that these most at-risk students had an average weekly gain of 1.98 wcpm. This compares quite favorably with the .8 ambitious weekly gain suggested by Fuchs, et. al. (1993).

Another way to assess progress is to compare students' reading growth over the course of the FDL/Poetry project with the progress students had previously been making. Assuming students had received instruction for 108 weeks in Grades 1 through 3 (36 weeks per school year), the average weekly growth for the 6 students prior to the FDL/Poetry Project was .56 wcpm. Over the course of the FDL Poetry Project these students made 3.5 times greater weekly growth than they had in grades 1 through 3. Assuming that there were still 25 weeks remaining in the school year at the time of the posttesting, if students continued to grow at the weekly rate of 1.98 wcpm, their oral fluency score at the end of the year would be approximately 126 wcpm, slightly below the 133 wcpm that Hasbrouck and Tindal indicate as the 50th percentile ORF score for spring of 4th grade.

Although this was a small scale project – 6 struggling readers in one classroom, this classroom-based project and research indicate that struggling readers can benefit substantially from whole class instruction that is aimed at fluency development and that does not require additional instruction time. Moreover, the authentic nature of the project allowed students to see themselves as proficient readers who received the accolades of classmate and others, and also developed a greater appreciation and understanding of poetry.

More research clearly needs to be done in the realm of fluency instruction, especially as it applies beyond the primary grades and as it impacts struggling readers. As more studies of this type, as well as more studies using more traditional approaches, demonstrate the importance of authentic fluency instruction, a greater awareness of the need to make authentic fluency instruction an integral part of all reading instruction in the elementary grades will likely have a positive impact on the reading achievement of all students.

NB: The video of students' performances of their poetry is available at:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1R4j813FazgUKZ-YqmCN3oCymSv70zvPj/view?usp=sharing>

References

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