IT’S GOOD TO GO FAST! FLUENCY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES
PROMOTE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Ask 100 teachers, “Is practice important?” and every one will answer, “Yes” (and more than a few will give you a funny look for asking a question with such an obvious answer). Then ask the same 100 teachers, “What is the purpose of practice?” Their answers to this question will vary considerably, but responses such as the following will be common: practice should help students “internalize the knowledge,” “attain a deep or rich understanding,” and “gain confidence” with the skill. These are worthy outcomes, but what does the performance of a student who has “internalized” a concept look like, and what types of practice will help students “gain confidence”?

Here’s another purpose of practice: Practice should help students achieve fluency.

What Is Fluency, and Why Does It Matter?

Fluency is the combination of accuracy and speed that characterizes competent performance. A person who is fluent performs a skill automatically, without hesitations, as if by second nature. Accuracy, typically in the form of percent correct, is commonly used to assess student performance; fluency gives a more complete picture of learning than accuracy alone. Whereas two students might each complete a page of math problems with 100% accuracy, the one who finishes in 2 minutes is more accomplished than the one who needs 7 minutes to answer the same problems. Fluency also has important functional implications. Many of the skills we use every day in school, home, community, or the workplace must be performed at a certain rate or speed to be useful. The student who needs 5 minutes to read the directions on a worksheet that his classmates read in 1 minute may not be able to finish the task in the time allotted.

A student who is fluent with a particular skill or knowledge is likely to exhibit the following outcomes (Binder, 1996; Kubina, 2005; Kubina & Morrison, 2000; Lin & Kubina, 2005; Smyth & Keenan, 2002):

- **Better retention**—the ability to use the skill or knowledge at a later point in time, even when no opportunities to emit the behavior have occurred since prior practice.

- **Greater endurance**—the ability to stay at the task for longer periods of time and stay engaged. Fluent performers are also less likely to be distracted by minor events in the environment.

- **Improved application and generalization.** For example, a student who has achieved fluency in component skills (e.g., multiplication facts and subtraction) may learn composite skills (e.g., long division) more quickly.

### Three Fluency-Building Techniques

The three fluency–building techniques described next—repeated reading, time trials, and SAFMEDS—can be conducted as teacher–directed practice activities one-on-one in small groups or whole class. Each technique can also be used as peer-managed or independent practice activities.

**Repeated reading.** Oral reading fluency is a key component of reading success (National Reading Panel, 2000). Students who can read fast can cover more material, and their comprehension is better than slower readers (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005). One of the most often-used interventions to improve reading fluency is repeated reading. With repeated reading, the student orally reads the same passage, usually three to five times during each session. With each successive reading, the student tries to increase the number of words read correctly per minute. The student first listens to the teacher, who models reading the passage; the student may read the passage silently, before beginning; and the teacher provides feedback and practice on missed words and
phrases (Alber-Morgan, 2007). When the student achieves the fluency criterion on a given passage, the teacher introduces a new passage. The difficulty level of successive passages gradually increases over time. The set goal is slightly higher than the current reading rate (Bursuck & Damer, 2011). Numerous studies report that repeated reading is an effective means for improving oral reading fluency for students with and without disabilities in elementary, middle, and high school (Alber-Morgan, Ramp, Anderson, & Martin, 2007; Tam, Heward, & Heng, 2006; Yurick, Robinson, Cartledge, Lo, & Evans, 2006).

*Time Trials.* Giving students the opportunity to perform a skill as many times as they can in a brief period—time trials—can be an excellent way to build fluency. Practice in the form of 1-minute time trials helps students with and without disabilities achieve fluency with a wide range of academic, vocational, and other skills (e.g., Beck, Conrad, & Anderson, 2010; Codding, Burns, & Lukito, 2011; Johnson & Layng, 1994; Miller, Hall, & Heward, 1995; Smith, Marchand-Martellea, & Martella, 2011).

*SAFMEDS.* Say All Fast a Minute Each Day Shuffled (SAFMEDS) consist of a deck of cards with a question, vocabulary term, or problem on one side of each card and the answer on the other side. A student answers as many items in the deck as he can during 1 minute. The student looks at the question or problem, states the answer, flips the cards over to reveal the correct answer, and puts the card on either a “correct” or “incorrect” pile. Eshleman (2000) provides examples and guidelines for using SAFMEDS.

**How to Get Started**

Teachers should consider these guidelines when planning and conducting fluency-building activities:

> Use fluency-building during the practice stage of learning. During the initial acquisition stage of learning, the student should focus on learning to perform the skill
correctly. A student who tries to “go fast” before she can perform the skill correctly more often than incorrectly might end up “practicing errors” instead of building fluency. (Because they reveal the correct answer to each question, SAFMEDS can help build fluency during the acquisition stage of learning.)

- *The time for each fluency-building trial should be brief.* One minute is sufficient for most academic skills. Brief interval sprints of 10 seconds, then 15 seconds, 20 seconds, and so on can help students gradually build their fluency (Kostewicz & Kubina, 2010).

- *Do fluency-building activities every daily.* For example, a series of two or three 1-minute oral reading time trials could be conducted at the end of each day’s lesson.

- *Make fluency building fun.* Time trials should not be presented as a test; they are a learning activity that can be approached like a game.

- *Follow fluency-building activities with a more relaxed activity.*

- *Feedback should emphasize proficiency* (total number correct), not simply accuracy (percentage correct).

- *Encourage each student to set goals and try to beat his or her own best performance.*

- *Have students keep track of their progress* by self-graphing their best performance each day.

- *Consider using a performance feedback chart* to provide both individual students and the class with feedback during a fluency-building program.

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**References**


