Laughing Through Rereadings: Using Joke Books to Build Fluency

Molly Ness

Although fluency has been a traditionally overlooked component of reading development (Allington, 1983), its inclusion in the Report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) has brought it to the forefront of conversations about effective reading instruction. Fluency is often defined as the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression; fluent readers demonstrate accuracy in decoding, automatic word recognition, and prosody including intonation, expression, and appropriate phrasing (Allington, 1983; Chall, 1996; Kuhn, 2005; Reutzel, 1996). The instructional importance of fluency cannot be understated, as fluency is strongly correlated with reading comprehension (Allington, 1983; Samuels, 1988; Schreiber, 1980).

The Role of Prosody in Fluency

The recent attention on fluency largely focuses on the role of automaticity and accuracy and thus overlooks the importance of prosody. The glossing over of prosody may be because of its subjective nature; whereas automaticity and accuracy are easily quantified, prosody cannot be clocked with a stopwatch or measured with a rate. Prosody is multifaceted and hinges on the following elements of language within a text: emphasis or stress, pitch or intonation, tempo, and rhythm (Harris & Hodges, 1995). Zutell and Rasinski (1991) explained prosody as “the extent to which reading ‘sounds’ like speaking, that is, how much it conforms to the rhythms, cadences, and flow of oral language” (p. 212). Good readers parse text, or break it into its appropriate phrase units, often using punctuation as a visual aid. Schreiber (1980) pointed out that fluent readers read with prosody by using morphemic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic cues to parse text. Though the nature of the relationship between prosody and reading comprehension is not yet fully understood, reading with prosody certainly facilitates comprehension of text (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000).

Most teachers easily recognize the students who struggle with prosody: students who read in a choppy or word-by-word manner, who do not adeptly apply appropriate phrasing, or who read in a flat or monotone manner. Poor prosody can lead readers “to confusion through inappropriate or meaningless groupings of words or through inappropriate applications of expression” (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005, p. 703).

In assessing prosody, teachers can observe a student’s oral reading and consider the following factors (Hudson et al., 2005):

- Student’s emphasis on appropriate words
- Student’s tone of voice rises and falls in applying intonation
- Student’s inflection matches punctuation (such as rising tone to signify the asking of a question)
- Student’s use of vocal tone to reflect characters’ emotions in reading dialogue
- Student’s appropriate use of pausing at phrase boundaries and punctuation

Using Jokes for Prosody Instruction

Recently, I began using joke books to help disfluent readers become more expressive readers who use intonation, inflection, and appropriate phrasing. This instructional practice stemmed from my one-on-one work with Emma (a pseudonym), a 9-year-old girl who experienced difficulties in reading throughout her schooling. My time with Emma began in the summer between her fourth- and fifth-grade years, when we paired up for six weeks of remediation in a univer-
also Emma was disengaged and unmotivated by this routine. Three months into our time together, Emma brought in a joke book that she had purchased at a school book fair. The back cover had lured her with promises of “impressing your friends with these truly crazy jokes” (Singleton, 2004). I judged the book to be at her instructional level, based on vocabulary and sentence structure, so I encouraged Emma to choose some jokes to share aloud. When she delivered them in her usual disfluent manner, we spoke about her favorite comedians and how they sounded when telling jokes on television and in movies. In our conversation, we focused on the importance of pacing, stressing the right words, and reading in a smooth, fluid manner. Emma accepted these objectives as her tasks in becoming a “joke teller.”

The Whys and Hows of Joking Through Rereading

Jokes are the quintessential texts for oral delivery; they require that a reader attend to punctuation, intonation, and phrasing. Certainly, everyone has listened to a poor joke delivery and thought, “The joke was funny, but the delivery was lousy!” A joke teller who isn’t fluid in delivery, who pauses too long or not long enough, or who doesn’t emphasize the

| Table 1 |
The NAEP Oral Reading Fluency Scale, Grade 4 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) |
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<tr>
<th>Fluent</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Reads primarily in larger, meaningful phrase groups. Although some regressions, repetitions, and deviations from text may be present, these do not appear to detract from the overall structure of the story. Preservation of the author’s syntax is consistent. Some or most of the story is read with expressive interpretation.</th>
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<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrase groups. Some small groupings may be present. However, the majority of phrasing seems appropriate and preserves the syntax of the author. Little or no expressive interpretation is present.</td>
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<td>Nonfluent</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Reads primarily in two-word phrases with some three- or four-word groupings. Some word-by-word reading may be present. Word groupings may seem awkward and unrelated to larger context of sentence or passage.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Reads primarily word-by-word. Occasional two-word or three-word phrases may occur—but these are infrequent and/or they do not preserve meaningful syntax.</td>
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right words simply won’t get the desired reaction. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of incorporating joke books into fluency instruction is the element of fun. Previously, fluency practice with Emma entailed a somewhat monotonous cycle of timed repeated readings and Radio Reading (Greene, 1979; Opitz & Rasinski, 1998; Searfoss, 1975) of nonfiction, poetry, and narrative texts. The use of joke books as fluency texts diminished her sense of dread and emphasized the pleasurable aspects of oral reading. At the start of our third lesson using joke books, Emma asked, “Do we get to do jokes again or do we have to read?” Selecting jokes as fluency texts had given her the motivation to practice, to rehearse, and to reread to improve her delivery (for additional titles, see Table 2).

The advantages of using jokes as fluency texts go well beyond their fun factor. Jokes may introduce new vocabulary, particularly homophones and multiple meanings of words. Joke delivery requires an understanding of word puns and word play, stress and emphasis on particular words, and the ability to approach texts in meaningful phrases or appropriate text chunks. Because of their conciseness, readers must deliver jokes in meaningful phrases—an important aspect of fluency. Consider the following joke:

Doctor, Doctor, I feel like a strawberry.
Well, it sounds like you’re in a real jam. (Singleton, 2004, p. 38)

After each joke, I asked Emma to identify the humor in the joke. She immediately recognized that the joke’s humor lay in the word play between strawberry and jam. We chatted about the double meanings of jam—both a fruit spread and a difficult situation. She reported that the joke’s humor was in how jam here played off of both meanings. I challenged her with the following prompt; “Knowing that the word jam is what makes this joke funny, how could you read this better?” With that understanding, she recognized the need to stress the word jam to emphasize the joke’s humorous pun. After a discussion of the humor in the joke and a minilesson on how to make her voice convey that humor, I modeled the appropriate intonation, stress, pausing, and tone for each joke, an instructional tip recommended by Zutell and Rasinski (1991).

Another joke required Emma to call to mind homophones:

Doctor, Doctor, my husband smells like a fish.
Poor sole! (Singleton, 2004, p. 38)

In her initial reading, Emma delivered the joke in a monotonous tone with no emphasis on the punch line, “Poor sole!” When discussing this joke, Emma recalled the difference between sole and soul. She reported that the joke was used “the kind of soul like the fish to mean the kind of soul like in a person.” As a result of this discussion, Emma changed her reading to stress the appropriate word and to improve her delivery.

**Tips for Laughing Through Rereadings**

Using jokes as a text for fluency practice requires that teachers provide modeling, guided and independent practice, and meaningful feedback on students’ performances. As teachers coach disfluent readers through ways to improve their oral delivery of jokes, the following suggestions may be useful:

- To begin, have the student read the joke orally. Listen and take anecdotal notes on his or her delivery, with particular attention to word emphasis, timing, and expression.
- Discuss both the joke itself and the student’s delivery of the joke. Have the student reflect on the humor of the joke. After identifying the source of the humor, focus the student on how

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<th>Table 2: Children’s Joke Books</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brewer, P. (2003). <em>You must be joking!: Lots of cool jokes, plus 17½ tips for remembering, telling, and making up your own jokes.</em> Battle Creek, MI: Cricket.</td>
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to use his or her voice as a tool to improve on the joke’s humor.

- Point out punctuation, including question marks, commas, periods, and exclamation marks, and discuss what purpose they hold in the joke’s meaning and humor. Explain how the punctuation affects the reader’s voice, word emphasis, timing, and expression.

- Model a proficient delivery of the joke while the student listens. Ask the student to evaluate your delivery of the joke and explain why it was effective. Highlight particular things that the student should focus on in his or her rereading.

- Use choral and echo reading to reread the joke with the student. In this guided practice, encourage the students to attend to punctuation, to focus on word emphasis, and to adjust the intonation of his or her voice and the timing of his or her delivery.

- Have the student record his or her first delivery. Listen to the recording together and focus the student on areas for improvement. After teacher modeling and guided practice, record the student’s second delivery. Listen to the second delivery and discuss the progress made.

- Have students work with partners to tell or re-read jokes. Partners should listen and evaluate each other for their expression, timing, and word emphasis.

- Give students time over several days of instruction to practice their jokes in preparation for "Comedy Hour," a time when students perform their jokes as comedians for their classmates or classroom visitors.

Tracking Emma’s Progress

As exemplified by my work with Emma, jokes provide a ripe instructional opportunity. As we laughed through rereadings, Emma paid careful attention to punctuation, changed her intonation and inflection, paused appropriately, and read with fluidity and expression. After several months of using joke books, discussing the humor in each joke, and adjusting her delivery accordingly, Emma earned a score of three on the NAEP fluency scale (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Her growth from a disfluent reader to a fluent one was nothing to laugh at.

References


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