

# Building Fluency through the Repeated Reading Method

If you have sympathized with students who stumble through reading passages or pore over every word in an expressionless manner while barely comprehending, this article is for you. For the last two years I have used Repeated Reading (RR) to teach reading fluency in English as a Foreign Language classrooms in colleges and universities in Japan. RR is a method where the student reads and rereads a text silently or aloud from two to four times to reach a predetermined level of speed, accuracy, and comprehension. All my students made progress, many in relatively short periods of time. By practicing RR and the skills associated with it, students learn to read faster and more accurately and to apply gains made to more challenging texts.

Although using RR to develop fluency appears best suited for beginning readers who have difficulty with pacing, expression, or word recognition, I also have used the method successfully with mature readers. Providing opportunities to read age-appropriate, authentic content such

as prose, poetry, novels, and newspapers is excellent practice for learners with some ability to read because it gives them a chance to integrate skills they have already begun to acquire, such as flow, fluidity, and comprehension (Koskinen and Blum 1986; Dowhower 1989).

Providing second and foreign language (L2) learners with sufficient exposure to and experience with reading can be a challenging task. In particular, students who are not yet fluent readers seldom read when it is not required and tend not to enjoy the process when they do engage in it. The opposite, however, can be said of good readers—the more they read, the more they improve their reading abilities. It is probably safe to say that reading ability and reading confidence are very closely related. RR supports the learning of English by creating confident readers who enjoy reading, and the three techniques described in this article will illustrate how the method can be used to develop fluency, comprehension skills, and greater reading self-esteem.

## Background of the Repeated Reading method

First popularized by Samuels (1979), RR was initially designed for special needs students in first-language (L1) settings. The method was so successful that it is now used widely with developing L1 readers (Kuhn and Stahl 2000). For over 30 years it has been used extensively in L1 environments to help build fluency and is supported by research (LaBerge and Samuels 1974; Samuels 1979; Dowhower 1989).

RR works as a scaffold for struggling readers by providing them with short-term, achievable mini-goals such as completing a passage in faster time (speed), increasing words read correctly (accuracy), and reading for a better understanding of the text (comprehension). The resulting success learners experience through RR builds their confidence and encourages them to invest more time and effort into achieving the skill of reading fluently (Dowhower 1994; Nuttall 1996).

However, RR has not received the same recognition in L2 classrooms, where the method has been slow to catch on. Its benefits have seemingly gone unnoticed, and very little research has been published in support of the method as a fluency-building tool for L2 learners (but see Taguchi 1997; Taguchi and Gorsuch 2002; and Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, and Gorsuch 2004 for excellent coverage of RR's great potential in developing reading fluency among L2 learners).

One explanation for RR's relative absence from L2 classrooms may be that some educators feel fluency develops naturally over time. As other reading skills progress and gradually improve, so too does the ability to read fluently. Another possibility is that teachers faced with big class sizes, limited contact hours, and strenuous curriculum demands may not have the time to focus on fluency as an essential reading skill.

Fortunately, the RR method is firmly rooted in sound linguistic theory, and good theory often leads to practical outcomes. There are a variety of simple-to-implement techniques for using RR in the L2 context that require little preparation on the teacher's part, including (1) Oral Repeated Reading, (2) Paired Repeated Reading, and (3) Reader's Theater.

## Technique 1: Classic Oral Repeated Reading

Oral Repeated Reading (ORR) is a technique that is fun and easy to carry out and that provides a window into readers' ability to integrate the skills associated with reading fluently (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2000). Oral reading helps students associate printed language with spoken language, improves their reading rate and rhythm, and provides opportunities to experience the pleasure of reading with a real purpose (Rasinski 2003). It can also build confidence and strengthen learners' perceptions of themselves as readers (Greenberg, Buggey, and Bond 2002). Oral reading has also been shown to correlate with reading comprehension (August and Shanahan 2006) and to help learners acquire a greater understanding of how to comprehend material that is read silently (Opitz and Guccione 2009).

In the classic version of ORR, students read and reread short, meaningful passages of text aloud, typically four times. I find setting short-term goals, such as reading faster or reading with more appropriate phrasing, helps learners stay focused. Alternatively, you can set criteria for speed, accuracy, and comprehension. After four readings or when the criteria are met, learners may proceed to the next section of the text. Other versions of ORR include using pre-recorded audio to provide a model and the use of computers to record, time, track, and chart learners' progress.

### Oral Repeated Reading classroom suggestion: Chunk it

Oral reading fluency is best developed when learners focus on reading sentences seamlessly, as opposed to word by word. A *chunk* (or *sense group*) is a meaningful part of a sentence, such as a phrase or a clause, and often corresponds to the places where an individual will naturally pause or use appropriate intonation when reading a text out loud. The following four steps will help your students begin to visualize sense groups.

### Step 1: Begin with a compelling poem or story

Most genres of writing work well as ORR activities, including prose, poetry, speeches, fables, short or serialized stories, recipes,

radio/TV commercials, and public service announcements. For learners who can sight-read easily, but have not yet mastered reading with expression or good rhythm, find a poem or a short story with dialogue. I like Shel Silverstein's poetry, because it is often accompanied by pictures that serve as visual support for learners (e.g., Silverstein 1996). Graded readers (books divided into levels and written with controlled vocabulary), limericks, and simple speeches also work well.

### **Step 2: Break the text into chunks**

Write the poem or story's lines (on the blackboard or on an overhead transparency) in a narrow column with one sense group per line. Three- to four-word phrases work best; however, you can also break phrases into longer or shorter chunks depending on the skill level of your learners. Alternatively, you can write each sense group on cue cards. You can easily change the length of the chunk that readers work with.

By breaking the text  
into chunks  
you help introduce your learners  
to the notion of taking in  
increasingly longer chunks  
as they read.

### **Step 3: Model the reading of chunks**

Show students how good readers cluster portions of text together rather than saying words individually. If you have arranged the text into a column (as above), use a card guide or cardboard mask about the same width as the column to expose the text line by line. You can also create and display sentence strips and model reading the sense groups one at a time.

### **Step 4: Practice reading the text to build proficiency**

To build confidence with the text, have students read the lines together out loud as a group. Hold the cardboard mask just above the first line and then, as they read, move it down the column at the desired speed. Time and resources allowing, you can provide students with an individual copy of the text and their own cardboard mask. Once they

gain proficiency and confidence reading the piece together, you can call on individual students to read for the class. Assigning the piece as homework the night before is one way of guaranteeing success for this type of task. Finally, you can reinforce the reading of sense groups in guided reading activities by using the same poem or story and pointing to the lines that were previously read as an ORR activity.

### **Technique 2: Paired Repeated Reading**

The objectives of Paired Repeated Reading (PRR) are similar to those of ORR. Both focus on pronunciation and prosody (the variation in loudness, pitch, and rhythm); however, PRR includes a measure for self- and peer-assessment. Research reports from L1 teaching environments indicate significant improvement in support of oral fluency and comprehension when teachers incorporate PRR regularly into their classrooms (Fuchs and Fuchs 2005; Koskinen and Blum 1986).

To use PRR, simply select an interesting reading passage and have your students work in pairs. I use novels serialized into installments to maintain learner interest and enthusiasm; however, short stories, poetry, and fables work nicely too. If it is not possible to give each student a copy, make an overhead transparency or write the text where all students can see it. You can also pass out one handout per student pair to cut down on copy costs and encourage more teamwork and cooperation between learners.

Alternatively, you can ask students to self-select materials. Be sure the content is on their independent reading level and does not contain too many unknown words or difficult grammatical structures (e.g., relative clauses, passive phrasing, or ambiguous time references).

### **Paired Repeated Reading classroom suggestion: Free yourself**

The real beauty of PRR lies in its capacity to free up teachers, allowing them to monitor their students' progress with minimal management. Following is a three-step technique, adapted from Koskinen and Blum (1986), that I use to kick off PRR and help students collaborate in developing fluency.

### Step 1: Teach the role of the reader

Learners need opportunities to practice reading. Explain to students they will be reading and rereading a passage several times to improve their skills. An analogy such as soccer players taking corner kicks to improve their accuracy may help students realize the value of practicing repeatedly. You can also remind them that good readers keep their listeners engaged by reading with appropriate speed, rhythm, and intonation.

### Step 2: Teach the role of the listener

It is worthwhile for teachers to explain that listeners can help their partners improve their reading fluency in two big ways with PRR: first, by giving help where possible with unknown words or mispronounced phrases, and second, and perhaps more importantly, by providing feedback about how the reader has improved between readings. Do not worry about your students' inability to catch every word; listeners do not need to be high-level learners to appreciate and comment on good delivery and effort.

Teachers can encourage active listening and collaboration by calling on students to report how their partner read or by making a handout and collecting it after the activity. Something as simple as one or two sentences jotted on the board can provide students with positive things to say to one another. For example, in response to the question "How did your partner improve?" suggest answers such as "(name) read more smoothly," "(name) knew more words," or "(name) read with more expression." Another option is to develop a Likert scale for learners to give and receive feedback to each other while working together. The scale can be passed out (or written on the board). A single question such as "How well did your partner read today?" written two or three times should suffice. Label the accompanying Likert scale ranges from "Nice job" to "Needs work" as in the example below and show learners how to respond to it.

First Reading: How did your partner read today?

☺	-----	☺	-----	☹
Nice	Nearly	Okay	Nearly	Needs
job	perfect		there	work

### Step 3: Combine reading, listening, and assessment

The final step offers learners an opportunity to combine the reading, listening, and assessment elements of the technique. It helps to begin PRR by reading to the class, and you may find it useful to model a poor, choppy reading of a few sentences and then model a fluent reading of the same sentences. Teachers should supervise the student pairs as they take turns reading and listening, and especially during the evaluation process. You can ask listeners to fill out the evaluations after the first and last readings, after the final two readings, or in any combination you like. In situations where both partners are lower-proficiency readers, have them start with the easiest material you can find. As an alternative to providing feedback to each other, learners can complete a set of listening questions or tasks (e.g., a very easy worksheet) for which they need information from the text their partner is reading.

### Technique 3: Reader's Theater

Reader's Theater (RT) is the reading aloud of a written text to communicate a story. Although commonly confused with drama or acting, RT is actually quite different; there are no costumes, no props, and most importantly, no memorization. Instead, student groups are assigned to read different parts of a script. Adaptations of books, movies, fables, historical events, or even popular TV shows can all be scripted to create an RT presentation.

The goal of RT is simple: to increase reading self-confidence by practicing multiple readings of a text, thereby improving comprehension, fluency, and accuracy. Second language learners are thought to gain accuracy and improved fluency by the repetition of tasks (Bygate 2001), and the rereading required in RT presentations gives them valuable practice in moving from decoding printed words into sounds to fluid and automatic word recognition (Samuels, Schermer, and Reinking 1992).

Scripts can vary in length depending on the proficiency of your learners, but a good script will provide every student with at least two or three lines to read. Roles can include several characters, as well as a narrator who guides the story. More advanced, outgoing,

or daring readers may choose bigger parts, whereas less-skilled or shy readers may choose fewer lines. Regardless of classroom size or dynamics, RT can be customized to fit a variety of learning environments.

If your RT groups are small, a script may have more roles than readers. In that case, assign individual readers more than one role. (But be sure they are not in the same scene reading two different parts!) You can also cut characters out completely or combine two

roles together. If your groups are large, use more than one narrator and split character roles into two or more parts. Very often a character can be divided to create two or more speaking parts. You can also assign silent characters to help with the storytelling or assign non-speaking roles. Crowd scenes can also incorporate groups of extra readers. Figure 1 contains an excerpt of a script I wrote to introduce my learners to a series of tasks revolving around life at sea.

**NARRATOR 1:** Bunglie was hungry. He quietly left his pen and looked down out of the window onto the deck below. Sparky was there, along with the sheep.

**SPARKY:** Got any food?

**LOXY:** No. Not a thing.

**TRIXIE:** My heavens, no. We haven't had anything for almost two days. Whatever are we to do?

**SPARKY:** Birds!!! How 'bout you? Have you got any food?

**BUB AND CHUB:** [together] Sorry no.

**SPARKY:** Cows... You have any food?

**COWS 1, 2, 3, and 4:** [singing] No, no, no. We haven't got any food.

**ZOOTIE:** [looking at husband] We're going to get some food. I know a safe place.

**HUSBAND:** [scared, in a whisper] Are we going without asking a human? Won't it be dangerous?

**SPARKY:** We'll be careful. [creeping away] Don't worry!

**NARRATOR 2:** Then Sparky left with Zootie and her husband in search of something to eat.

**NARRATOR 1:** But Bunglie could not stay in his pen. He had to eat something... [in a louder voice] ...now!!

**Figure 1: Excerpt of Reader's Theater Script**

Scripts can be simple or detailed and complex. I prefer to keep the writing simple because I feel it leads to more authentic dialogue. For busy teachers who do not have time to write original material, the Internet can be a valuable resource, as there are dozens of adaptable RT scripts online. If your Internet access is limited, you can always have your students write their own RT scripts. This is a popular alternative to teacher-selected content because student-generated material provides teachers with a chance to observe what learning objectives have been internalized by their students. Teachers can encourage the inclusion of important dates, vocabulary, or grammar points to raise the complexity of the dialogue or the assignment. Regardless of where the script comes from, doing RT almost always leads to laughter and language learning. Following is a five-session plan for a Reader's Theater presentation.

**Reader's Theater classroom suggestion: All the world's a stage**

**Session 1:** Model fluent and expressive reading by reading aloud from the script or the story on which your script is based. Time and interest allowing, consider focusing on some aspect of problematic pronunciation for students to keep in mind as they practice (e.g., reduced schwa sounds, consonant clusters, suprasegmentals). Pass out copies of the script and encourage students to read silently all the parts by themselves. If you lack the resources to give each student a script, you can create pairs or small groups and have students share. Once they have read over the dialogue fully, allow time to discuss the meaning and content.

**Session 2:** Divide students into groups and hand out scripts. Students read through the scripts entirely, each time concentrating on a different role. For example, if there are four students and four roles, the script should be read four times with each student reading aloud a different role every time. In situations where there are more roles than readers, ask students to take on more than one character. Circulate among the groups, coaching and offering advice and support.

**Session 3:** This is the same as the Session 2; however, toward the end of this session, have

students divide up the parts. Alternatively, you can assign the roles for the final session. Students read their parts as homework and begin preparing for their performance.

**Session 4:** Students read and rehearse their parts together with their group members. Toward the end of the session, students can make character nametags and plan any necessary movement or decide where groups will stand during their turn.

**Session 5:** Each group performs the reading for the class or possibly in front of an audience. To set the stage for future endeavors, you may wish to have learners assess themselves and their group members' effort leading up to the reading. Ask learners to respond to statements like these: "Next time, to improve my reading fluency, I plan to \_\_\_\_\_," or "To achieve my goal, I will \_\_\_\_\_." Another simple and effective way to encourage self- or peer-reflection is to provide students with a checklist of statements grouped into the following categories:

Put a check mark (✓) next to the areas you feel you/your partner did well:

1. Phrasing/Fluency
  - (I/My partner) paid attention to the author's language.
  - (I/My partner) read longer phrases.
  - (I/My partner) had good expression.
2. Pace
  - (I/My partner) used good speed when reading.
  - (I/My partner) did not pause too much.
3. Accuracy
  - (I/My partner) could read the words easily.
  - (I/My partner) read quickly, but (my/my partner's) words sounded meaningful.

**Conclusion**

Readers who lack fluency often read in a plodding, word-by-word manner and are slower and less accurate than fluent readers. Moreover, because their reading is so laborious, their understanding of the text is often limited. With such ineffective reading patterns, non-fluent readers typically fall behind



their peers and do not learn to enjoy the act of reading. In the past, fluency-building techniques like oral reading have been neglected in the L2 reading classroom for a variety of reasons. Time constraints, teacher philosophy, and misuse of techniques like Round Robin Reading (taking turns reading aloud around the classroom) have eclipsed the benefits of fluency development and have cast a negative light on oral reading.

The method of RR was developed to help struggling readers improve their fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. In the L1 classroom, reading aloud to a teacher or to a peer is an important first step toward developing fluent decoding and comprehending skills; both are a necessary preparation for silent reading. The three techniques presented in this article are designed to help learners achieve reading fluency and have just as much value in the L2 classroom as in the L1 classroom. As L2 learners read aloud and convey the message of the text to sympathetic and interested listeners, they strengthen their skills and self-confidence. Most importantly, RR activities encourage L2 learners to enjoy reading and to practice the skill more frequently, which is critical to the development of advanced proficiency.

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