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Implementing Fluency First Activities in an Intermediate-Level EAP Reading Class

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The goal of the intermediate level in our postsecondary intensive English program at George Fox University—a small, liberal arts university in the United States—is to introduce academic language skills to students whose institutional Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores range from 400 to 450. After using an analytical, skills-based approach for a number of years, I felt dissatisfied with the students' level of learning. Seeking a solution, I came across an on-line discussion[1] of teachers who postulate that students cannot benefit fully from instruction in higher order skills unless they have first developed basic fluency. The first goal of an English for academic purposes (EAP) course, according to MacGowan-Gilhooly (1996), should be to develop reading fluency, in other words, "reading at a normal pace and understanding most of what you read without relying on a dictionary" (p. 1) or "confidence, comfort and control in ... reading" (p. ix). Once students can read fairly fluently, they are equipped to tackle more analytical, academic reading skills.

The Fluency First Approach

How can we cultivate fluency? Teachers at City College of New York (CCNY) designed and implemented a whole-language approach they call Fluency First, which is a systematic set of activities for first developing fluency and then focusing on clarity and correctness. In this approach, learners read and write massive amounts of English and use the language in a workshop atmosphere. Without ESL textbooks, sequenced, grammar-based syllabi, or uni-

form curricula, grammar and vocabulary learning occur at the point of need (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1995). The Fluency First approach emphasizes pleasurable, meaning-driven, task-based learning. An emphasis on creating an atmosphere of acceptance reduces stress and motivates learners through gratification rather than fear (Tillyer, 1997, October 11). MacGowan-Gilhooly (1997, April 24) emphasizes that within the Fluency First approach, teachers have freedom to develop their own teaching styles.

The ESL program at CCNY integrated the development of reading and writing skills at three levels: fluency, clarity, and correctness. According to MacGowan-Gilhooly (1995), although the focus of each level differed, the same general pattern of activities occurred in the courses at each level:

- reading 1,000 pages as homework at a rate of 70 pages per week;
- keeping a double-entry journal;
- discussing journal responses and questions about the reading in small groups;
- doing a 10,000-word writing project;
- reading pieces of the writing project to partners in class to obtain feedback on how to make them more comprehensible, logical, and interesting; and
- receiving teacher feedback in the final revision stage.

At the fluency level, students read popular fiction and biographical works (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1995) and viewed excerpts from movie versions of their books, if available, to help develop fluent reading (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1996, February 27).

Course Design

Encouraged by reports of improvement in reading and writing skills of students in ESL courses using the Fluency First approach (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1995; 1997, April 24), I decided to incorporate the following Fluency First activities in my intermediate-level ESL reading classes:

- reading 10 or more pages per day in novels or popular nonfiction;
- writing double-entry journals;
- viewing excerpts of related videos; and
- discussing the reading in small groups.

In addition, I devised a set of expansion activities to bring closure to each segment of the course. Fluency First activities constituted the central core of the reading course, but I also continued using the following components of my previous syllabus: word analysis (a study of stems and affixes), a 2-week textbook unit, and a reading lab aimed at increasing reading speed and comprehension. The result was a class that met 4 hours (hr) per week, with an average of about 10 hr of homework per week, according to student reports.

The remainder of this article describes how I implement Fluency First activities in an intermediate-level ESL reading class, drawing insights from my experiences teaching the course five times. This discussion, which should be of particular interest to ESL teachers in secondary or postsecondary programs, explores considerations involved in selecting books, preparing course materials, introducing and implementing Fluency First activities, and dealing with some problems that may occur.

Books Used in Intermediate–Level Reading Courses

Difficulty[1]	Bibliographic Information	Days Required	Interest[2]	Recommendation[3]
3.00	Lovell, J., & Kluger, J. (1994). *Apollo 13*. New York: Pocket Books.	29	2.50	2.00
3.00	Blake, M. (1988). *Dances with wolves*. New York: Fawcett Gold Medal.	29	2.40	2.00
2.80	George, J. C. (1972*). Julie of the wolves*. New York: Harper & Row.[4]	9	2.57	1.75
2.75	Lee, L. (1977). *Walking through the fire*. Chappaqua, NY: Christian Herald Books.[5]	8	2.17	1.71
2.50	Raskin, E. (1997). *The Westing game*. New York: Puffin Books.[4]	13	2.40	1.43
2.50	Black, C. (1981). *Raiders of the lost ark*. New York: Ballantine Books.	14	2.33	1.50
2.50	Angelou, M. (1993). *I know why the caged bird sings*. New York: Bantam Books.	22	1.88	1.80
2.50	Frazier, N. L. (1984). *Stout-hearted seven*. Seattle, WA: Northwest Interpretive Association.[6]	10	1.75	1.50
2.25	Costner, K., Blake, M., & Wilson, J. (1991). *Dances with wolves: The illustrated screenplay and story behind the film*. New York: Newmarket Press.	9	2.40	1.67
2.25	Spelvin, G. (1995). *Jumanji*. New York: Scholastic.	9	2.23	1.90
2.14	Salzman, M. (1986). *Iron and silk*. New York: Vintage Books.	15	2.77	1.91
2.00	Lord, B. B. (1984). *In the year of the boar and Jackie Robinson*. New York: HarperTrophy.[4]	7	1.57	1.67
1.86	George, J. C. (1988). *My side of the mountain*. New York: Puffin Books.	12	2.00	1.90
1.80	Lewis, C. S. (1994). *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*. New York: HarperTrophy.	9	1.83	1.43
1.75	Baum, L. F. (1984). *The wizard of Oz*. New York: Signet Classic.	12	2.60	2.00
1.75	Hermes, P. (1996). *Fly away home*. New York: Newmarket Press.	11	2.40	2.00
N/A	Farley, W. (1969) *The black stallion*. New York: Random House.	15	N/A	N/A

Notes on Titles:

[1] Student evaluation of difficulty: 3 = Too difficult, 2 = Appropriate difficulty, 1 = Too easy.

[2] Student evaluation of interest in book: 3 = Very interesting, 2 = Interesting, 1 = Boring.

[3] Student recommendation of whether to use this book in the future: 2 = Recommend, 1 = Don't recommend.

[4] No movie available.

[5] Out of print. The author, Laurel Lee Thaler, grants permission for teachers to make photocopies of *Walking Through the Fire* for their classes.

[6] More historically accurate than movie, *Seven Alone*.

Selecting Books

Engaging and challenging novels whose language is accessible to intermediate-level English learners are essential to the success of this approach. I select award-winning novels and nonfiction narrative literature of interest to young adults for which movies are available, such as *My Side of the Mountain* (George, 1988), *Iron and Silk* (Salzman, 1986), and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou, 1993). I also use novelizations of popular movies, such as *Jumanji* (Spelvin, 1995), *Fly Away Home* (Hermes, 1996), and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Black, 1981). Each semester's selection of books is designed to accommodate different tastes, yet a sense of continuity develops during the course, as students compare and contrast the books' themes and characters.

In general, successive books should increase in difficulty. A readability scale, such as the Flesch-Kincaid grade level, a standard in the U.S. government and military, can inform the process of selecting and sequencing books. I use Correct Grammar (1991) software to conduct a readability analysis to determine each book's Flesch-Kincaid grade level based on sentence and word length. This software does not take into account other sources of difficulty, such as the grammatical complexity of sentences or the familiarity of content and vocabulary, so the students' perception of the relative difficulty of a book may not correlate with its Flesch-Kincaid grade level. Thus, I use this only as a starting point for identifying books at an appropriate level. Once a group of books is selected, they should be compared

directly to determine the optimal sequence, taking into consideration both relative difficulty and thematic development.

At the intermediate level, I have used books from Flesch-Kincaid grade levels 2.8 through 8.3. These books, in order of difficulty as rated by students, are listed in the sidebar on page 12.

The decision about whether to use a certain book is an individual one that must take into consideration the personal preferences of the teacher, the interests and abilities of the students, and any institutional or program restrictions. I consider the criteria listed in the sidebar on the right when selecting books for a course. Many of these criteria are subjective. The teacher's attitude toward a book affects the students' attitudes, so a teacher should select books that he or she finds enjoyable and worthwhile to read.

Occasionally, after students have become comfortable with Fluency First activities, I provide a choice of two different books rather than imposing my own selection on the entire class. The opportunity for learners to choose and discuss a book with classmates who have similar tastes in reading increases their level of commitment. The teacher facilitates the overall process, but the students assume more responsibility for its details.

Preparing Materials

Designing the course involves the following tasks.

- Reading each book and dividing it into reading assignments of approximately equal lengths, considering natural breaks in the story. The reading assignment for each day should contain between 3,000 and 4,000 words.
- Writing a brief page-by-page summary for reference. This summary is a handy resource for the teacher to use in preparing quizzes, speed contests, and video segments, as well as in monitoring and stimulating small-group discussions.
- Viewing the movie and making a summary of the action, scene by scene, noting elapsed time. Use this summary to determine which section of the movie to show with each reading assignment. Time permits showing only short excerpts in class.
- Collecting other supporting materials, including supplemental videos, books, articles, reviews, poems, songs, and maps, and identifying possible guest speakers and field trip destinations.
- Planning activities for each class session, seeking to provide variety and balance while pursuing three goals: (a) establishing a common understanding of the essential elements; (b) focusing on the students' own interests, insights, and questions; and (c) extending and applying their understanding.

Preparation time is greatest the first time a particular title is used; to reduce preparation time for subsequent classes, it is helpful to assemble a file of suitable book titles and accompanying teaching materials.

Typical Lesson Plan

A typical 50-minute (min) class session includes two or more of the following activities: a comprehension activity, journal sharing, an expansion activity, and a video preview of the next reading assignment. A full explanation of each of these types of activities appears in the next section, "Implementing Fluency First." Time allotted to each type of activity varies, depending on the content and challenges of a particular reading assignment, the interests of the students, the teacher's goals, and the need for balance and variety.

Early in the course, a typical class begins with a speed contest—a comprehension activity in which groups, referring to their summary notes and their books, seek to determine the page numbers where three or four key events are recounted (see the sample speed contest on p. 14) Members of the first group to complete the exercise earn extra-credit points if all their answers are correct. This ordinarily takes 5–10 min. Next, in their small groups, students read their journal entries aloud and discuss their reactions and questions for about 15 min, or enough time for each student to share. The next 15 min are spent doing an expansion activity. For example, in each group, students collaborate to compose three different possible endings to the novel they are almost finished reading. Then they share and discuss their favorite endings with the class and predict what the actual ending might be. Finally, students watch a 5- to 10-min excerpt of the video to prepare them for the next reading assignment.

Late in the course, the lesson may be much more student-directed. As a comprehension activity, groups summarize the main developments in the reading selection. During the journal-sharing activity, groups note any questions that come up during their discussion and pose them to the whole class during debriefing. An expansion activity might involve discussing an issue raised in the reading, such as racism or gender roles.

Implementing Fluency First

Introduction to Students

Once accustomed to the Fluency First approach, students function quite capably.

However, because it differs from their previous educational experience, Fluency First must be introduced to students deliberately and gradually. At the beginning of the course, I allot time to explain the concept of Fluency First and to introduce the process step by step. *Jumanji* (Van Allsburg, 1981) is ideal for this introduction. I use the illustrations and text of the award-winning children's book that inspired the movie to show students that they can read and understand a text, moving at a steady pace, even though they do not know many of the words. (I explain that although I am using a children's book as a starting point, the novelization and movie have themes that are of interest to adults and can make learning English both challenging and entertaining.)

Next, I show the first scene of the movie and read aloud the corresponding chapter in the novelization (Spelvin, 1995) as the students follow along. At the end of each page, I ask the students to summarize the most important development on that page, and I write a few summary phrases on the board, instructing the students to copy them in a margin of the page in their own book. I then point out to them that they were able to understand important elements of the story, despite the many unfamiliar words, in part because the movie had given them an idea of what was going to happen.

I tell the students to continue reading at home, moving along steadily, writing brief summaries on each page, and trying to understand the gist of the story without stopping to look up unknown words. I tell them to circle words that they feel they must know, but to continue reading without stopping to look them up. (In later classes, we explore strategies for dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary.) For homework, I also ask the students to mark three short passages that they think are particularly interesting or important.

One expectation is that students will practice an individualized approach to vocabulary development, consciously learning as much vocabulary as they choose.

In the next session, the class divides into small groups that engage each other in a speed contest, in which students use their summary notes to find the page numbers of certain events. Next, in pairs, students share their selected passages and tell each other why they chose them. Each pair chooses a passage to present to the rest of the class and, after several minutes of practice, one student reads it aloud and the other explains the reason they chose it. (This technique is based on a procedure developed by Betsy Rorschach, as reported by Tillyer [1996].) Afterwards, writing on the board what two or three pairs of students have shared, I model the process of writing a double-entry journal and explain the purpose of each element. With this demonstration and explanation, along with a sample page from a previous student's journal, learners are ready to begin their own double-entry journals.

Daily Reading

Students read four to six novels or popular nonfiction books in a 15-week course—between 3,000 and 4,000 words per day—outside of class. Following a detailed schedule, they read six days a week, regardless of the number of days a week the class meets. I encourage them to read at a steady pace, focusing on important information about plot and characters.

As they read, students mark sections of the text that have particular interest for them. They also keep a reading log in which they record which pages they read each day and a very brief summary of the content of those pages. The purpose of the reading log is to provide evidence that students have done the reading and to encourage them to reflect on and summarize the most important developments in the text.

Students evaluate whether to look up unfamiliar vocabulary items as they read. If they can grasp the general meaning of a section of the text without knowing the precise meaning of a word, they simply continue reading. Otherwise, they try to use context clues or word analysis (by considering stems and affixes) to guess meaning, or circle the word and keep reading. After finishing a section, they look over the circled words to decide whether to look them up. Some students consult a friend or ask in their double-entry journals about key words whose meaning in context is unclear to them.

One expectation is that students will practice an individualized approach to vocabulary development, consciously learning as much vocabulary as they choose. At the same time, the focus on meaning and vast exposure to comprehensible input facilitates unconscious acquisition of vocabulary (Krashen, 1989). Learners increase their vocabulary through repeated exposure as they read each extended text and as they use new words in their writing and discussions.

Students who try to read daily assignments word by word with a dictionary are likely to feel overwhelmed and fall behind. Thus, it is important to continue encouraging students to read at a steady pace, focusing on important information about plot and characters and postponing dictionary use until afterwards.

Double-Entry Journals

After reading a daily assignment, students look over the parts that they marked as being of particular interest and choose several short passages to copy into their double-entry journals. They copy the selected sentences, with page numbers, onto the left side of a piece of notebook paper that has been divided in half with a vertical fold. On the right side, they freewrite a reaction to the passage—comments, questions, opinions, predictions, memories (see the sample journal entry on p. 15). They prepare two pages for each class session and keep them in a loose-leaf binder. Using this format rather than a bound notebook enables the teacher to collect current journal entries once a week without interrupting the students' journal-writing rhythm. For grading purposes, I record the number of pages each student writes.

The Fluency First approach involves a great deal of extensive reading to provide students with massive exposure to the language. One reason for copying sentences from the book is to provide examples of correct English for closer examination. In copying the sentences, the student may begin to notice and assimilate word order, punctuation conventions, phrasing, grammar, and spelling. Students learn how to use ellipses (...) to indicate that a section has been omitted from a copied passage, a practice that I find they easily transfer to writing assignments. I require students to proofread the left side of their double-entry journal to be sure they have copied text accurately.

Writing free reactions in the right-hand column helps students increase their fluency in writing as they focus on expressing meaning. In reacting to a copied selection, students may recycle some of the vocabulary of the original sentence, which contributes to

acquisition (Mayher, Lester, & Pradl, 1983). I focus on meaning rather than form when I write brief responses to selected entries. Reading and responding to double-entry journals helps me better understand my students and their learning processes. In addition, students report that our journal interactions give them much-appreciated access to me, as we exchange thoughts, information, and concerns.

Videos

When available, video supports the process of developing reading fluency (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1996, February 27). I often show a scene from the movie before students read the corresponding section of the book to enable them to develop a schema or background knowledge about the story before they read (Carrell, 1988). As a result, when students encounter an unknown word in their reading, they can guess its meaning more easily or tolerate not knowing and continue reading to follow the main story line. As the course progresses, I vary the procedure, sometimes showing a scene after the students have read it so they can generate their own images of the story before viewing a director's interpretation. After the students finish reading a book, they view the whole movie. In addition to helping students cope with challenging texts, using video increases their motivation and engages them visually and aurally.

I have found that teaching a reading class using Fluency First activities is refreshing and fulfilling. Once the students settle into the rhythm of the reading schedule, the class develops its own momentum.

Although video is a helpful tool, Fluency First can be used with books for which there is no accompanying video. For each group, I usually assign at least one book that has not been made into a movie. I observe that learners who have become accustomed to reading and viewing a supplemental video work very hard to help each other understand books that have no video. Later, many students report that the next book they read with access to a video seemed easier (even though it was at a higher level of difficulty), which to me indicates that their fluency and confidence have increased.

For example, seven of eight students in one group, when asked to describe their strategies for reading, stated that seeing the movie helped them understand the book. One explained that the movie enabled her to understand the story so that when she encountered unfamiliar words, she was able

Sample Page from a Student's Double–Entry Journal

Copied text	Freewritten reaction to text
Jumanji, **Chapters 24-27**	
Pp. 169-170	
The croc opened and shut his mouth, eager to eat.	I like these sentences because the author was very humorous.
Sarah's legs scissored in and out with the motion	
The other croc paddled closer, eager to share the upcoming meal.	
Pp. 177-178	
Peter yowled with terror.	The giant spiders appeared just like hailstone, and Alan got an ax, which was his father kept. (Now Alan knew that his father was beneficial for him.)
Around him, giant spiders dropped like hailstones	
"Peter!" Alan shouted. "My dad kept an ax in the woodshed. Get it!"	

Journal excerpt written by Kao Tseng-Tsai, George Fox University. Used with permission.

to guess their meanings. After reading two books without movies, three of eight students mentioned that they felt these books were more difficult to read as a result. Thus, in some instances where students rated books as "too difficult," they still strongly recommended them for future use because they found the stories to be engaging and because the movie version made the books more understandable.

Small-Group Activities

Challenging yet pleasurable group tasks promote a more positive attitude toward the daily reading. Students work in groups of three to five for much of each class hour. Three types of activities, each with a specific goal, are comprehension activities, journal sharing, and expansion activities.

The goal of *comprehension* activities is to bring all students to a common understanding of the essential elements of plot and character in the reading assignment. Giving groups a brief quiz to do collaboratively is a way to evaluate comprehension informally while reducing stress. As an alternative to quizzing, I give small groups a task in which students compare and clarify what they understand about the main points of the assignment. The speed contest described earlier is one such task. Another is a jigsaw activity in which each group lists the important developments in a certain part of the story and then works together with the whole class to reconstruct the story orally.

The goal of *journal sharing* is to provide an opportunity for students to focus on aspects of the reading that are of particular interest to them, sharing their insights and discussing possible answers to their own questions. To this end, students share their journal entries in small groups. Each student, in turn, selects a journal entry and reads to the group both the copied excerpt and his or her response to it.

Members of the group react with comments, questions, and attempts to answer each other's queries. Students often ask and answer important questions spontaneously and creatively as they share their journal entries. Therefore, by monitoring the substance of these discussions, I can capitalize on student insights in my follow-up with the whole class. Because journal sharing motivates students to keep up, offers them support when they encounter difficulties, involves them actively in interacting with both text and classmates, and allows them to discover important aspects of the reading, I include a period of journal sharing during almost every class session.

The goal of *expansion* activities is to extend and apply the students' understanding. The design and focus of these activities vary depending on the particular titles involved, the resources available, and the creativity of the teacher. The following are some examples of expansion activities.

• Groups collaborate to answer questions designed to deepen their understanding of important elements of the story.
• Students act as detectives, matching the names of main characters with anonymous character sketches, written as homework (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1996).
• Pairs interact in a silent, written dialogue in which each student plays the role of a character in the story (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1996). A variation is to have one student play the role of a character in the current book and the other the role of a character in a book read previously.
• Groups examine a list of events and indicate whether the events occurred in the novel or the movie. This activity is designed to help students notice important differences between the movie and the book.

- Students read and interpret a poem that is related to the theme of the book.
- Students learn and sing a related song.
- Groups use clues from the reading to attempt to solve a mystery.
- A guest speaker leads a discussion with the class. Examples of guest speakers are the author of the book, a person whose experiences are similar to those of a character in the book, or an expert in some subject related to the book.
- The class views and discusses a documentary video for background information.
- The class takes a field trip to a museum or other destination for a firsthand experience related to events in the book.

For examples of other types of small-group expansion activities, including producing a class video of a scene from the novel, see any book in the Novel Approach series, such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Gareis, Allard, Gill, & Saindon, 1998).

In addition to small-group expansion activities, individual expansion activities, such as a comprehensive objective quiz and an essay assignment, each followed by a discussion, help bring closure to each unit. They also encourage students to finish the reading on time, help them understand the ending of the story, and involve them in reflecting on the story as a whole.

Problems

Typical problems that may occur in a Fluency First classroom involve the pace of reading and the dynamics of small groups. Strategies for encouraging students to keep reading on schedule can be built into the course syllabus. These include reduced or no credit for late journal entries; occasional quizzes; frequent peer interactions in small groups, which tend to motivate learners to maintain the pace; and an assorted reading list, which enables students to look forward to reading a different book every 2 or 3 weeks.

It is important to deal with problems as early as possible. If students fall behind in their reading and journal writing, I encourage them to get back on schedule by reading the current assignment without making up the earlier reading, consulting classmates to fill the gaps in their knowledge of the story. I also urge them to read fluently, not word by word, and to write double-entry journal entries even if they are unable to read the entire assignment.

Students who are up-to-date on their reading and journal writing are more likely to participate actively and meaningfully in small-group discussions. Because small-group interaction is a key to the success of this approach, the teacher should seek to group students in ways that optimize the free and active participation of each member and minimize the potential for conflict arising from personality or cultural factors. It is important to stress that each person has a right to express his or her own opinions and must be treated with respect.

Conclusion

I have found that teaching a reading class using Fluency First activities is refreshing and fulfilling. Once the students settle into the rhythm of the reading schedule, the class develops its own momentum. With the teacher's guidance and feedback, students become more actively involved in their learning, assuming increasing responsibility for the functioning of their small groups and working together to follow an established agenda. They debate issues that emerge in their reading and relate them to their own experiences. As they share their writing and thinking with the group, they inspire each other to do better work. Many students express satisfaction in the realization that they are reading and enjoying books written in English, something most had never done before. Finally, a comparison of students' scores on the institutional TOEFL shows gains in reading performance that may be attributable to the use of Fluency First activities in the reading class.

In my opinion, the Fluency First principles and activities described in this article have improved my intermediate-level reading classes. In the belief that sharing teaching ideas and insights can help educators explore ways to increase their teaching effectiveness, I offer this article as a starting place for ESOL teachers who would like to experiment with Fluency First in reading classes.

Note

[1] The Fluency First branch of TESL-L, TESLFF-L, is a forum for sharing questions, insights, and tips on using the Fluency First approach. To subscribe, send the message SUBSCRIBE TESLFF-L to listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu.

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