SO LONG, ROBOT READER!

A Superhero Intervention Plan for Improving Fluency

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Look! Up in the air! It’s a bird! It’s a plane! No, it’s Poetry Power Man, ridding our classrooms of the evil Robot Reader, fighting for multifaceted fluency and motivated students!

Missy (all names are pseudonyms) reads 100 words per minute with a flat voice and a mind that’s focused on what’s for lunch. Sammy reads 120 words a minute, caring not about content, but about the improvement in his rate-oriented graph. And Kirstin reads 20 words per minute, valiantly decoding all letter sounds due to a sight word bank that’s in need of a bailout. It seems these second-grade students have fallen prey to the devices of the evil Robot Reader and his sidekicks—Choppy Boy, Flat Man, and Alien Dude. It’s time for Poetry Power Man and his superhero friends—Super Scooper, Expression Man, and Captain Comprehension—to enter our reading blocks. Their mission? To fight for fluency and all its facets—rate, expression, accuracy, and learning—what Marcell has called REAL reading (Marcell, 2011).

Here is an account of Poetry Power Man’s adventures in one suburban Chicago second-grade classroom and an adjacent intervention room where he went cape to cape against the evil Robot Reader. Although we maintain our vigilance to ward off ever-lurking villains, we are pleased to report that all of our Missys, Sammys, and Kirstins are now devotees of real fluency. So, grab your cape. It’s time to say so long to the Robot Reader!

Fluency’s Back Story

Fluency came to the forefront of reading instruction when the National Reading Panel Report named it a key element of reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). In the years that followed, one-minute fluency assessments measuring rate and accuracy gained widespread use, spurred by the Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative calling for measureable data to be used in benchmarking and progress monitoring student performance. Soon fluency became the “skill du jour” as intervention programs emphasizing repeated readings came on the scene. These instructional programs were largely designed to address the improvement of rate and accuracy—the features of fluency that are quantifiable. Literacy leaders across the nation voted fluency a “hot” topic in reading instruction (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2010).

All the while, however, concerns were being raised about what many considered an overemphasis on rate and accuracy at the expense of prosody and comprehension (Deeney, 2010; Johns, 2007; Marcell, 2011; Rasinski & Hamman, 2010). It was not long before the same literacy leaders who had called fluency “hot” deemed it “not hot” and “should not be hot.”

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leading one to wonder whether fluency would even make the list of categories to be voted on in years to come (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2012). So what caused fluency’s apparent fall from grace? It seems that, amid the well-intentioned use of timers, graphs, and programs devoted to repeated readings, fluency practice was being distilled to “race reading.” And according to Rasinski (2012), “If fluency is nothing more than reading fast, then fluency instruction should be considered cold” (p. 516). Authentic fluency, he says, is “reading with and for meaning” (p. 517).

Up in the Air: The Need for a Superhero Intervention
We concur with Rasinski’s (2012) definition of fluency and have seen firsthand the results of an overemphasis on reading fast. For example, rather than applying before-reading comprehension strategies such as previewing and making predictions, some of our second graders have been known to ask, “Are you timing me?” After reading, rather than providing a retelling or seeking to clarify, some of our kids may inquire, “Did I beat my last score?” Most disturbingly, a few of our struggling readers have actually read aloud those little numbers on the right margin of commercial fluency passages—oblivious to the nonsensical language, “Grandpa’s snore 25 keeps Grandma awake.”

Furthermore, it seemed that our problem-solving meetings were becoming more centered on RTI tiers that identified rate-deficient readers. These students were then placed in intervention groups designed to increase rate and accuracy. Although these interventions did render progress in reading speed, we noticed that many of our students were beginning to ignore punctuation and lack intonation. Worst of all, some could not provide an accurate retelling.

Although we believe that automaticity is indeed a hallmark of reading fluency, we needed our students to grasp fluency’s multifaceted features and related strategies—to adjust pace, to add expression, to connect and summarize. We also wanted to make fluency instruction more engaging for kids. That’s when our superhero friends flew in.

Why Poetry?
To read poetry is to reread poetry. The first reading of a well-composed poem usually entails acquiring the rhythm of its language. Follow-up readings involve the appreciation of this rhythm, a determination of appropriate phrasing, along with a bow to the poem’s print features and underlying meaning. Metaphors, similes, personifications reside within this multilevel genre that is suitable for all readers. Indeed, some would say all five elements of reading can be taught through the medium of poetry—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Faver, 2008; Stanley, 2004).

In addition, poetry inherently promotes the integration of fluency’s multiple facets—rate, expression, accuracy, and learning. Also, although a multitude of genres, even song lyrics, lend themselves to fluency instruction, we selected poetry as the launch pad for our mission. Poems were extracted from the basal, a classroom collection, or an online source.

The Fight for Real Fluency Is ON!
We based the instructional routine for the week’s “battle” on a sequence that has stood the test of time—the fluency development lesson (FDL). This procedure entails certain elements that may take place over the course of a week, a few days, or all in one day—namely, (a) the introduction of a short passage (poems are recommended); (b) a read-aloud; (c) a discussion of content; (d) choral reading; (e) paired reading; (f) word study; (g) home
practice; (h) performance; and (i) a final rereading, preceding the introduction of the next FDL passage (Rasinski, 2010).

We tweaked this methodology by using only one poem per week and including an optional words per minute tally. In addition, we aligned each rereading with a fluency feature or superhero specialty. Practice #1 introduced Super Scooper and his phrasing technique, Practice #2 brought in Expression Man and his call for voice inflection, and Practice #3 featured Captain Comprehension advocating for summarizing and connecting to deepen understanding. As with the FDL, the final day entailed performances (See Figure 1).

**Introducing the Good Guys and the Bad Guys**

In preparation, we cut out the individual character cards and pasted them back to back on popsicle stick handles (See Figures 2–5). Our caped characters were introduced using our poster and as much drama as we could muster—in the manner of a movie trailer (See Figure 6).

There’s a Bad Guy we need to watch out for in our reading. He is the evil Robot Reader and he is trying to get us to read like robots. How does a robot sound? [demonstrating; asking for examples from students] He knows that if we read like that, we won’t understand what we read and reading won’t be fun anymore. That’s his mission. And he has lots of help. Here are his sidekicks—Choppy Boy who wants you to chop words [demonstrating word by word reading with chopping hand motion], Alien Dude who wants you to read like a Martian without understanding the words [demonstrating robotic reading followed by a quizzical look and the question, “Hmmm...what did I just read?”], and Flat Man who makes sure your voice doesn’t go up or down [demonstrating a voice without intonation].

But guess what? The Good Guys are here to help us! Let me introduce you to Robot Reader’s archenemy—Poetry Power Man. His superhero friends are Super Scooper, who will go against Choppy Boy; Captain Comprehension, who will battle Alien Dude; and Expression Man who will make Flat Man history! Let’s join these Good Guys and say so long to the Robot Reader and his sidekicks!

After handing out copies of the Poem of the Week, we explained:

When you read a poem for the first time, you might sound like a robot. But don’t worry...Poetry Power Man and his friends will help you. By the end of the week, you will sound like a teacher! Listen as I read this poem out loud.

"Poetry inherently promotes the integration of fluency’s multiple facets—rate, expression, accuracy, and learning."

This teacher read-aloud (along with a kid-friendly explanation of vocabulary and literary elements, as needed) would be followed by Practice #1, a head to head “fight” between Choppy Boy and Super Scooper. Because phrase boundaries are not visibly apparent to young readers (Rasinski, Yildirim, & Nageldinger, 2011), Choppy Boy had found particular success with our Kirstins, who pointed to words individually, eyes fixated on the print. To counteract this tendency, we began with a demonstration of disfluent reading—meaning, Choppy Boy himself (on his popsicle stick perch) read the poem aloud in a laborious, word-by-word fashion.

Then, turning our card, Super Scooper would “fly in” to demonstrate how to draw scoops under phrases so that oral reading would sound like talking. This was done on the overhead or chart paper, with students scooping phrases on their individual copies. We then choral read the poem using our scooping technique to ensure Choppy Boy’s defeat. At this juncture, a copy of the poem would go home for ongoing practice.

The next day Flat Man would take on Expression Man. After demonstrating expressive reading versus “flat” reading, we sometimes had partners time one another for a minute and then calculate individual rate scores. We did this to highlight the fact that
Figure 1 Instructional Routine for Superhero Reading Intervention Plan

Name: _________________________________

Introduction
Read the poem out loud with your class. How many words did you read in a minute?
Take it home to practice.

Look out for the evil Robot Reader. He’s very sneaky. Cross him out whenever you see him!

Practice #1
Super Scooper versus Choppy Boy
Read the poem again. Scoop 2, 3, or 4 words together so that your reading sounds like talking.
Look out for Choppy Boy! He wants you to chop up each word. Cross him out!

Practice #2
Expression Man versus Flat Man
Read the poem again. Make sure that your voice goes up and down!
Look out for Flat Man! He wants your voice to stay at the same volume. BORING! Cross him out!

Practice #3
Captain Comprehension versus Alien Dude
Read the poem again. Are there any tricky words? Can you connect the poem to your own life?
Look out for Alien Dude! He’s from Mars and only speaks Martian. When he reads, he has no idea what the words mean. Cross him out!

The Final Battle
Poetry Power Man defeats the Robot Reader!

Read the poem one last time – not too fast and not too slow. Count your words per minute.
Did you get rid of the Robot Reader and his sidekicks?
Title of Poem: __________________________ Name: __________________________

Each time you read this poem, cross out an evil sidekick and circle a Superhero!

My Rate Goal is _______ words per minute.
At the beginning of the week, I read ____ words in one minute.
At the end of the week, I read _____ words in one minute.
fast reading can easily become “flat” reading—that reading is not about speed. This superhero would frequently make use of a kid-friendly “Expression-O-Meter” while kicking Flat Man out the door.

Finally, the biggest battle of all would be waged. Alien Dude would appear on the scene, reading the poem in a “take-me-to-your-leader” fashion. He would then ask himself, “Hmmm, what did I just read?” while gazing quizzically at the paper. That’s when Captain Comprehension (CC) would fly to the rescue, prompting students to make connections. Students would then highlight words or phrases that sparked relevant text-to-self connections and share these with partners. CC would then elicit a short summary—perhaps even asking students to act out some of the robust vocabulary featured in the text. He would remind students that he was the head of all fluency superheroes.

The last day of the week would entail performances. On occasion, our school principal came over the classroom intercom with a Robot Reader announcement, complete with an evil (though not too scary) laugh, challenging students to defeat him. Then, from our greatest strugglers to our top readers, in small groups or as a class, students would perform the poem with expression rivaling a Shakespearean actor. “Drat!” our Robot Reader would lament, “I’ll just have to wait until next week!” A cheer might break out.

Victory Is Ours!
We are now in our fourth year of implementing this Superhero Reading Intervention Plan and we remain as excited as our students! In terms of

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quantitative results, we can cite the fact that since the appearance of our superheroes, the median score of Christie’s class (derived from a widely used oral reading fluency assessment) has increased from 94 correct words per minute in the spring of the year before implementation to 112 in the spring of year 3. Of course, our superhero friends would remind us that rate is only one feature of fluency, and certainly this increase in reading speed could be attributable to a number of factors working synergistically.

Christie has attributed the increase in rate as follows: “Through the repeated readings of poems, my students have become increasingly familiar with previously unknown words. Their reading rate went up, up, up—without my having to emphasize the speed at which they should ‘fly.’”

Christie and I look more to our qualitative results in terms of gauging the effectiveness of our intervention plan. And what we can report is that the level of motivation or, simply, the fun factor, is higher with our superheroes than without. Indeed, there has been palpable excitement when Robot Reader has blared his challenge across the classroom intercom. And in my literacy intervention room, when Kirstin has had to read stilted sentences containing only closed syllable words—part of her phonics program geared to students with dyslexia—she can actually practice Super Scooper’s phrasing technique while reading “Bob has had bad lungs” and have fun doing so.

Across the tiers, in fact, we now have common language—“faces”

TAKE ACTION!

1. Investigate the poetry titles identified as exemplar texts in the Common Core State Standards. Devise a lesson plan wherein Captain Comprehension can “fly in” to model strategies for deepening understanding with challenging texts.

2. Develop a rubric for reading fluency that is student-friendly. This could be based on the REAL reading rubric developed by Marcell (2011) or one designed by you and your students.

3. Take performances to the next level by collaborating across grade levels. Older students could develop poetry podcasts of their performances to be shared with a wider audience.

4. For increased motivation, check out the websites that offer digital versions of poems, songs, and scripts. (See More to Explore.)
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Captain Comprehension. Even Robot Reader himself, taking the voice of his clever alias, our school principal, has had this to say about the superhero intervention plan: “It is a joy to experience our students growing in fluency and expression, despite my having to face defeat each year by my insightful poetry readers.”

And so every Friday, when our current students want to know, Did we beat the Robot Reader? We reply with confidence, “He’s history!”

REFERENCES