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Ann L. Nowak

Touro Law Center, anowak@tourolaw.edu

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Discovering a Predictor of Reading Comprehension Difficulties



Ann L. Nowak
*Director of the Writing Center,
Touro College, Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center*
anowak@tourolaw.edu

Sometimes you stumble upon a possible solution to a problem when you're not searching for a solution, and when you don't even realize there is a problem. This is what happened when I began to notice that a number of my students did not read smoothly when asked to read aloud.

I was teaching a Law Practice Management class the first time that I noticed students reading haltingly or reading word by word instead of reading words that flowed into each other. A guest speaker was calling on my students to each read a different sentence off some PowerPoint slides. Because I was observing my students rather than focusing on my teaching, I was able to notice more things about them than normal, including their oral reading difficulties. At the time, I didn't realize that their struggle was significant. I thought, "Hmmm. They don't read very well. I didn't expect that." But I didn't wonder about the significance.

This oral disfluency occurred again the next time I taught the course. And, again, I noted the odd occurrence.

But it wasn't until I was in a one-on-one bar counseling session with a student last spring that I realized oral disfluency might be a symptom.

I had asked the student, a 3L, to read a practice multiple-choice question aloud from a book, then read the four possible answers, then read the book's reasoning for why each answer was right or wrong.

As the student read, I was surprised to hear that her reading was not fluid. Her disfluency was subtle, but I noticed it immediately. She read words in a semi-staccato rhythm, sometimes missing words, sometimes inadvertently substituting words, occasionally mispronouncing common multisyllabic words, etc.

I mentioned this to two colleagues, one who teaches Intellectual Property and one who teaches Legal Process. Both told me that they had witnessed the same phenomenon among students in their classes. Neither of these professors had thought about whether this oral disfluency might be a symptom of something else. But I began to wonder. The problem seemed too pervasive not to be significant.

A neighbor just retired from a long career as an elementary school reading specialist, so I asked her if she knew anything about oral reading disfluency. Luckily, she knew a lot. To my surprise, she told me that she wouldn't be surprised if this was a pervasive problem because many elementary schools stopped requiring students to read aloud in class about 20 years ago, as a reaction to complaints from parents that children who struggled to read aloud were stigmatized. She also said that elementary school

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educators had written articles showing a link between oral reading disfluency and reading comprehension problems in primary school students. I subsequently read some of these articles and discovered that, indeed, there was a link, at least at the primary school level.

This led me to wonder if our law students’ oral disfluency issues also were symptomatic of reading comprehension difficulties. Perhaps the oral reading issues of these students had not been diagnosed and remediated in elementary school because no teacher had ever heard the students read aloud.

According to the published literature, elementary school students with oral reading disfluency also exhibit disfluency with silent reading because they never learned the techniques necessary to read fluently in any form, either aloud or silently.

Some students who have attended elementary school in the past 20-or-so years learned to read fluently on their own or with the help of parents and/or tutors. But other students who didn’t learn to read fluently might have learned to compensate. They could have pushed themselves to read silently with just enough speed and comprehension so they didn’t attract the attention of teachers looking for reading comprehension issues. These students, however, would still have been operating at a disability and were, to some extent, struggling to read fluently in their heads. They could read fast enough and comprehended well enough to perform adequately in primary school, secondary school, and even college. In some cases, they even excelled, but when they hit the rigors of law school, they couldn’t keep up. Law school’s technical terms, complex fact patterns, heavy work load, and rule-based knowledge are difficult for even the most facile of readers, but they are daunting for students who do not read fluidly in their heads. Thus, their grades suffer, and many of these students cannot process the amount of reading necessary—and acquire the amount of knowledge necessary—to pass the bar exam on the first try.

Certainly, oral disfluency is not the culprit for all reading comprehension difficulties in law students, but I believe it may well be one significant reason.

To that end, I constructed a research project to test my hypothesis and received a Presidential Research Development Grant to fund it. My preliminary results are due by the end of 2017.

If my hypothesis is correct, we can look for ways to remediate the problem. But how do we do this? Do we ask experts in elementary school education what they do and use the same techniques? Will these techniques be age-appropriate? Or can we fashion our own methods without the benefit of a PhD in elementary education? Would this work?

As part of my research project, I am looking at the possibility of using a free app called Spreeder. It's designed to enhance speed reading. I won't be using it to enhance speed reading, though; I'll be using it to enhance reading fluency. I discovered this "off-market" use of the app by accident.

Using hunch and intuition, I adjusted the app to flash a sentence on the computer screen one word at a time. Each word disappeared when the next word appeared. Then I slowed the speed way down so the words flashed at a much slower pace. I watched the words as they appeared, one at a time, slowly, one replaced by another. As I watched, I realized that the slow, one-word-at-a time appearance of words on the screen made me impatient. Further, I had trouble focusing on the overall meaning of the sentence because I was reading the individual words so slowly.

Then I set the app to do this with a paragraph made up of many sentences. I had trouble focusing on the meaning of the paragraph because I was too busy focusing on the slow visual procession of words. This is how some law students read: one word at a time.

Next, I tried speeding up the procession of words. I found that I was able to concentrate better. It was easier to concentrate on the overall meaning of the paragraph.

After that, I adjusted the app so that the words appeared two at a time. After trying that, I set it so that they appeared three words at a time. Then I tried four words. My ability to remember and understand the sentences and paragraphs improved. I've asked several colleagues and friends to try this, and they all had the same reactions that I did.

After using the app this way, I realized that this app, or one like it, could be a tool for retraining law students to become more fluid readers. The question is whether their reading comprehension will improve as a result. According to the large body of literature about reading fluency in elementary school students, an improvement in reading fluidly results in an improvement in reading comprehension.¹ Although there is only a small amount of research about this issue in regard to secondary school students, the reports are similar.² There is not, however, any significant literature about this issue at the level of higher education, and certainly not at the law school level. My use of the Spreeder app demonstrated that there was likely to be a link at the adult level, too. And this is what I hope to learn in my research project—whether there is a link between oral reading disfluency and reading comprehension difficulties in law students. (As part of my grant study, I also hope to test students in other types of graduate programs, and even in undergraduate programs.)

The bottom line is that if your students seem to be struggling with reading comprehension issues, don't immediately think that you can remediate the problem by sending them to the law school's Academic Support professionals for additional instruction on law-related matters like how to break down the meaning of cases. The students might need that kind of help, but they also might have a much more basic problem that needs to be remediated first. That is, the students might have an underlying problem that they are not reading words fluently in their heads.

So ask your students to read aloud, and then listen carefully. If they falter or if the reading is choppy, consider asking your school to hire a consultant who knows how to treat reading disfluency in adults. The consultant does not have to be familiar

with working at a law school because this issue is not specific to law students. Alternatively, you can wait until I finish my study and publish my results.³

The benefit of acting now is that you will be able to help the current population of law students who are struggling through school because of reading disfluency problems. If you help them to read more fluently, you will be helping them to get better grades. You also will be helping them to gain the confidence they need to succeed in both law school and life.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., John J. Pikulski & David J. Chard, *Fluency: Bridge between Decoding and Reading Comprehension*, 58 *READING TEACHER* 510, 510-19 (2005); Timothy V. Rasinski, *Why Reading Fluency Should be Hot*, 65 *READING TEACHER* 516, 516-22 (2012).

2. See, e.g., David D. Paige, Timothy V. Rasinski, & Theresa Magpuri-Lavell, *Is Fluent, Expressive Reading Important for High School Readers?*, 56 *J. ADOLESCENT & ADULT LITERACY* 67, 67-76 (2012); Soonha Seok & Bonaventura DaCosta, *Oral Reading Fluency as a Predictor of Silent Reading Fluency at Secondary and Postsecondary Levels*, 58 *J. ADOLESCENT & ADULT LITERACY* 157, 157-66 (2014).

3. You can also suggest that your students try to increase their reading fluency via the “Immersive Reader” at <https://onenote.com/learningtools>. Be aware, though, that this is not a substitute for working one-on-one with a reading specialist. That is, the problem with directing students to an online self-study program is that students who need it the most often do not make time to help themselves. Therefore, in-person intervention via a reading specialist is likely to be more effective.