# Reading Dysfluency in Indian Classrooms: An Insight

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*Abstract— Reading text in English is an important skill for students of higher education in India, as their understanding of their core subjects in specific and the world of information in general is based upon this skill. The ability to read English fluently, increases their job prospects also, as real time job environments use English as the official medium of communication and require that students read English with ease. Technical students who engage primarily with numerical data, diagrams and other non-textual content in their core subjects, have an especially hard time coping with tasks which involve reading textual English. There are several problems that lead to lack of fluency and thus lack of understanding of the content. This paper will study reading " dysfluency " problems technical students face, when reading English like word recognition difficulties, inability to read in sense groups, problems to do with accuracy, automaticity and expression. This paper will attempt to offer strategies to overcome this problem like Loud reading, Echo reading and Choral reading and some unconventional reading practices that can help solve this very common but important skill gap.*

*Keywords— reading dysfluency, recognition, automaticity, accuracy, strategies, innovative, learning graph.*
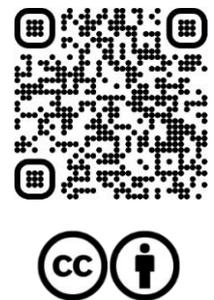
<u>"The Limits of my language are the limits of my world".</u>
<u>Ludwig Wittgenstein</u>

English reading fluency has suddenly become a very important requirement in most recruitment drives across all colleges in India, after having been neglected for many decades in our education system. Up until the 1980's , most school education had some component of marks in an examination, allocated to reading and recitation, in most Central and State Boards of education. However, in the last two decades with the focus of education in India shifting to pure or applied sciences & technology, leading to development of skills to deal with numbers and numerical data, reading in any language, more so English has become a rare skill to find indeed. Even students who have had their education in English medium institutions throughout their lives, struggle to read in English, right up to their undergraduate courses and beyond.

Cambridge Dictionary defines fluency as " the ability to speak or write a language easily, well, and quickly". In other words, fluency means to read at an appropriate pace, with precision, with the correct aspect and air. To realize and know what they are reading, learners must be able to read fluently, both when they are reading audibly or soundlessly. Why is fluency in English so poor among students in our classrooms? Several reasons can be ascribed for this. The first among them is the way "fluency" has been defined to us, and secondly the methods we use to build fluency among our students. Many a times, reading fast has been understood to be "fluency', not taking into account the accuracy of the reading at all. Accuracy is a very important part of fluency and cannot be separated from it.

So, let us first understand fluency and what it comprises of. Martin Galway in his article "A field Guide to Reading Fluency: A Reader's Digest of Our Work to Date", identifies three specific criteria for reading to be considered fluent.

- Automaticity (rapid word reading without conscious decoding)
- Accuracy (words read accurately, typically measured as a percentage)
- Intonation (expressive, phrased reading)

## Automaticity

Automaticity means the ability to read without having to decode a sentence word by word. This is an important skill because if the student's energies are simply engaged in decoding a word by its spelling, he loses focus on other aspects of reading such as comprehension, analysis, elaboration, and deeper understanding. As students grow older and start silent reading, teachers completely lose their influence over the student's English reading skills and this skill gap just remains with them all their lives.

## Accuracy

Accuracy is the ability to recognise a word and read the text with the correct comprehension of its meaning. Accuracy should not be misconceived as merely 'speed'. Adequate pace without accuracy in deciphering meaning cannot be recognised as 'fluency". Decoding errors, omissions of words and replacing words in the text with other words while reading, impact comprehension. Fluency includes comprehension and therefore accuracy goes hand in hand with automaticity.

## Intonation

Cambridge dictionary defines ' prosody' as ' the rhythm and intonation ( the way a speaker's voice rises and falls) of language'. Intonation has an important role to play in the comprehension of a spoken word. Meaning is derived not only from the words chosen but also from the tone a speaker uses, while he reads words aloud. Intonation not only improves peripheral or textual understanding of the intent of the text, but also contributes to a deeper and more holistic understanding of the authorial intent. Tone of voice carries information about emotion, intention, emphasis and beyond. So, intonation bridges the gap between word recognition and its meaning.

If this is what fluency essentially is, let us look at what causes English dysfluency among students in our classrooms in India and then look at what practises and remedies can be followed to correct this problem.

The relevant problems leading to dysfluency in reading English in our classrooms are:

- For most students, English is not their mother tongue.
- They do not have sufficient exposure to the English language, for them to gain an instinctive or intuitive rapport with it.
- Most students study the language to clear examinations and not to learn the language.
- Most of the earlier institutions they studied in, did not offer them conducive or encouraging environments to learn the language.

- Most students do not realize the importance of English until they appear for interviews or plan to go abroad for higher studies.
- Many of them do not have confidence, have learning disabilities or are just slow learners.
- Since most of the English that is taught in our classrooms is through the ' Grammar Translation Method', most students do not develop mastery of the language's idiom and phraseology and lack a flair for it.
- Most of the students have such a low exposure to the English language, socially, outside of the classroom that they have poor vocabulary.

Due to a combination of this lackadaisical approach of the students and the erroneous teaching methodology adopted by the academia, students find it challenging to read or express themselves in English. They are not sufficiently conversant with proper pronunciation or grammar rules. Problems with quick recognition and accuracy often reveal themselves as dysfluent word reading or as reading without understanding it. Beth Villani, Reading Specialist, describes some of the behavioural manifestations of dysfluency as:

- slow and laboured reading

- frequently hesitating at new words

- lacking appropriate expression which conveys the correct emotion/feeling.

- inaccurate decoding of unfamiliar words

- replacing words in the text with those of their own

- inability to memorize words that have been cognised and practiced earlier

- quick recognition of very small number of words

- poor comprehension even at a superficial level.

  Apart from these, problems with phonological skills/phonics lead to inefficient and tedious decoding and this in turn leads to difficulty in the development of spontaneous recognition of words. Inadequate time to practice, reading connected text with specificity is also another major reason for dysfluency. Moats and Tolman call it 'A core problem with processing speed/orthographic processing which affects speed and accuracy of printed word recognition'.

## Remedies.

Reading dysfluency in Indian classrooms appears to be a ubiquitous problem. However, the impact of this problem is enormous. As the famous American linguist, Benjamin Lee Whorf puts it "Language shapes the way we think, and

determines what we can think about". Reading dysfluency not only negatively impacts development of other skills in the LSRW spectrum of language learning, it also reduces a student's ideating process and limits his vision and world significantly.    Therefore, it becomes quite clear that the problem of dysfluency needs to paid heed to, and remedial action should be taken as early as is possible, during the language learning process.  Certain basic remedials that can be undertaken early in the process of language acquisition are:

1. Tracking the words with a finger as the teacher reads in the classroom. Then the student reads it.

2. Having the teacher read aloud. Then, the student matches voice with the teacher.

3.  Have the student read his favourite books multiple times, till his reading gathers automaticity, accuracy, and expression.

4. Evaluate the student to check if decoding or word recognition is at the root of the difficulty. If it is, then decoding will need to be addressed as an independent problem, independent of speed or expression.

5. Give the student an age-appropriate text that he can practice repeatedly. Get the student to read aloud and time him.  Calculate words-correct-per-minute regularly.   Discuss this analysis/data with the student, so that he can evolve his own improvement strategy.

6. Ask the student to record his reading. Ask him to play it back and identify his automaticity and specificity errors. Ask him to work on his errors.

7. Have the teacher read aloud in class and ask the student to read it back to him.

8. Instruct the student to read a passage with a definite emotion, such as sadness or excitement, to drive home the importance of intonation and expression.

9.  The teacher needs to include timed practice reading sessions into his instructional repertoire.

While these practises can and do help learners to tide over English Reading Dysfluency in the initial stages, more organized and formal strategies need to be employed to help older students struggling with reading dysfluency. Some of them strategies discussed by Martin Galway in his article "A field guide to reading fluency: a Reader's Digest of Our Work to Date", are:

### 1. Loud Reading

Loud reading and silent reading have advantages of their own. While loud reading in the classroom helps the learner to maintain his focus on the text and enhances his rapid reading and pronunciation skills, silent reading, on the other hand, is the most suitable method for reading in crowded places and helps improve comprehension skills.   Loud reading is generally slower than silent reading, however it is a better way to focus attention on the students' automaticity, accuracy and pronunciation.

### 2. Choral Reading

Choral reading is reading aloud in unison with a whole class or group of students. Choral reading helps build students' fluency, self-confidence, and motivation. As students are reading aloud together, students who may ordinarily feel self-conscious or nervous about reading aloud, have built-in support. There are various types of choral reading. Some of them are:

- Antiphonal:  Antiphonal reading involves dividing the class into smaller groups. Each group is given a different part of the text to read. Students are given time to practise reading before all the teams are brought in to read the text, one after the other.

- Role Play: In role plays, each group is given different speaking parts that contribute to make one role play. One team can play the narrator while the other groups play different characters.

- Cumulative Choral Reading:  In this method, the number of students reading, keeps increasing as the reading progresses. One group or one student can begin reading and another group joins in with him/them. The number of students who are reading, keeps increasing up until the end, when the entire class is reading together.

- Extempore Choral Reading:  One student begins reading the text and other students join in or fade out whenever they choose. Students can choose/plan their reading parts before the actual reading begins.

### 3. Beginning with Smaller Texts

Student's can begin dealing with their dysfluency by reading small texts, instead of lengthy ones. The small amount of decoding, accuracy and tonal needs will result in fewer errors. This will lead to an increase in confidence and motivate and prepare them for longer text reading exercises.

### 4. Repeated Reading

Repeated reading is frequently used to improve vocal reading fluency. Repeated reading can be used by students who have started on some amount of initial word reading skills but display insufficient reading fluency for their grade or age level. The idea of repeated reading emerged in the late 1970's as a result of the writings of Jay Samuels, Director of the Minnesota Reading and Research Project (1979) and Carol Chomsky, Harvard University (1978). They found, in two independent studies, that engaging kids

in repeatedly reading texts aloud improved their reading ability.

Scientific studies have shown the importance of "automaticity" to reading. Being able to decode without thinking about it consciously, is very essential to fluent reading. There is only a limited amount of brain space to think. The more a student uses this space for cognition or figuring out words, the less this space is available to comprehend the text's meaning. Jay Samuel believes, that repeated reading could help readers acquire an instinct for words. He believes that it helps readers become proficient in the art of reading words exactly and with sufficient speed.

## 4. Poetry Recitation and Performing Scripted Skits

Poetry and performing in skits and plays can also be used to improve dysfluency among students. Poetry has an inherent melody, rhythm, pace, expressions and ideas that helps students retain words in their memory, expanding their base vocabulary that in turn supports building fluency. Memorising dialogues for a skit does the same. The context, ideas, dialogue delivery with a certain emotion and coordinating with other actors help in recognising words, their comprehension and builds up a felicity in using them.

## 5. Text Marking for Phrasing

'Marking the Text' is a reading plan that requires students to critique their own reading". While reading the text, the student analyzes ideas, evaluates ideas, and circles and underlines essential information to own and personalizes his own reading. There are three different types of marking in this strategy: numbering paragraphs, circling, sense grouping (putting words together like in normal speech, pausing properly between phrases, clauses, and sentences etc).

## 6. Echo Reading

In this strategy, the facilitator usually reads a text line by line or sentence by sentence, demonstrating appropriate fluency. After reading each line, the students echo the reading of the line with the same rate and intonation. Echo reading is an easy-to-use reading tool for helping struggling readers develop fluency, expression, and reading at an appropriate pace. This strategy can also help them learn about using punctuation marks while reading. This strategy is often called re-reading, but technically these are two different things. Teachers can train students to use this methodology at home too. It can help struggling students to improve their confidence, comprehension, ability to identify unknown words, improve their listening skills, phrasing and vocabulary.

## 7. Paired Reading

Paired reading is a research-based fluency building tool. In this approach, students read aloud to each other. When pairing students, fluent readers can be paired with less fluent readers, or two students who are at the same level can be paired to re-read a story they have already read and practiced.

Paired reading helps students to work together, encourages collaboration among them and provides a platform for peer-assisted learning. It allows them to take turns at reading and provide feedback to each other, as a way to gauge comprehension. By reading together with a reading helper, a student's reading experience is modelled and supported, without their errors being held up for scrutiny and making them nervous.

## 8. Supported Reading

Audio-assisted reading is an individual or group reading activity where students read along, in their books as they follow a fluent reader, reading the book on an audio recording (audiotape, audio book, or iPod).

## CONCLUSION

Dsyfluency in the perusal of English texts in Indian classrooms continues to be a challenge for most teachers of English in India. While social and academic issues contribute to its existence, the teachers need to meet this challenge by thinking of different ways of making the text accessible to a struggling student and create out of the box solutions. Ultimately, the teacher has to ensure that the students lose their dependency on teachers and their peers and become independent readers, who can read fluently and comprehend their own reading as well.

The teacher needs to adopt a 'problem solving approach', while dealing with this problem. The teachers can also 'think aloud' about what to do when they encounter this problem and encourage students to come up with their own strategies. This not only helps the students handle the text, but also helps them think about creative classroom strategies that can help mitigate the problem of dysfluency.

To conclude, it is evident that, in spite of concerns around reading English in classrooms, it continues to challenge the teacher and his pedagogy. It is important to be attentive to it from the early years or whenever it is encountered and use tried and tested and sometimes innovative techniques to help students gain fluency in reading. This is necessary to make sure, that their other learning skills are not impacted adversely and their learning abilities remain independent and strong all through their learning years and through their long term learning curve.

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