

Reading aloud with expression is a foundational reading skill students should be developing between grades 1 - 5, according to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (2012). It is pretty easy to recognize when someone skillfully reads aloud in an expressive manner. However, to effectively teach or assess this skill, a closer examination of its features, development, and relationship to other reading skills is needed.

Prosody, the defining feature of expressive reading, comprises all of the variables of timing, phrasing, emphasis, and intonation that speakers use to help convey aspects of meaning and to make their speech lively. One of the challenges of oral reading is adding back the prosodic cues that are largely absent from written language.

Researchers have found strong links between oral reading prosody and general reading achievement. For example, after comparing students' reading prosody in first and second grades with their reading comprehension at the end of third grade, Miller and Schwanenflugel (2008) concluded that, "early acquisition of an adult-like intonation contour predicted better comprehension." Another study, which included more than 1,750 fourth graders participating in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), found a strong correlation between prosody and overall reading achievement (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005).

In the context of oral reading, prosody can reflect linguistic features, such as sentence structure, as well as text features, such as punctuation. Skilled readers pick up on these features, and respond to them when reading aloud, as when they pause briefly at relevant commas, pause slightly longer at sentence boundaries, raise their pitch at the end of yes-no questions, and lower their pitch at the end of declarative sentences. While punctuation provides some cues to prosody, young readers can be misled by it. For instance, they may pause at every comma, even when the grammar of the sentence does not call for pausing (e.g., "He made his usual egg, cheese, and tomato sandwich."). As young readers move toward adult proficiency, their pauses increasingly respect the grammar of the text rather than doggedly following the punctuation (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006).

Prosody can also reflect aspects of meaning. For instance, slight fluctuations in pitch, timing, and emphasis can change a simple question (e.g., "What did you do?") into an expression of censure. Learning to read dialog in a manner that reflects the intentions and emotional states of the characters is a great way for adolescent readers to delve deeply into literature. However, younger students may not understand this use of prosody well enough to apply it to oral reading (Cutler & Swinney, 1987). Notably, in the NAEP study, only 10% of fourth graders were judged as reading aloud with this level of expressiveness.

Finally, when thinking about prosody, it is critical to remember the other aspects of reading fluency: word reading accuracy and reading rate. Inefficient word reading is the primary barrier to good prosody for most young readers (Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Wisenbaker, Kuhn, & Stahl, 2004). Children who are struggling to decode individual words tend to pause too frequently and for too long, so that their timing and phrasing are seriously disrupted. Furthermore, they must put so much effort into decoding that they do not have the mental resources left for constructing meaning and conveying it expressively.

Listening to the prosody of a child reading aloud provides parents and educators with a window into many aspects of reading skill. By reading aloud with appropriate timing, phrasing, and end of sentence intonation, younger readers can demonstrate their ability to:

- read words accurately;
- read at a reasonable rate;
- read most words automatically, so that mental resources are available for comprehension;
- use grammar and punctuation to help construct meaning;

By reading aloud with increasingly adult-like intonation and expressiveness, adolescent readers can demonstrate their ability to:

- use discourse-level features, such as pronouns and signal words, to recognize relationships across and among the sentences in a text;
- understand characters and their intentions when reading fiction
- understand an author's purpose or attitude.

Ultimately, all of these abilities must be brought to bear to achieve the ultimate goal of reading with comprehension.

References:

Common Core State Standards Initiative (2012). English Language Arts Standards – Reading: Foundational Skills (Grade 1 – Grade 5). National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO): Washington, DC.

Cutler, A. & Swinney, D. A. (1987). Prosody and the development of comprehension. *Journal of Child Language*, 14, 145-167.

Daane, M.C., Campbell, J.R., Grigg, W.S., Goodman, M.J., and Oranje, A. (2005). Fourth-Grade Students Reading Aloud: NAEP 2002 Special Study of Oral Reading (NCES 2006-469). U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Miller, J. & Schwanenflugel, P. J. (2008). A Longitudinal Study of the Development of Reading Prosody as a Dimension of Oral Reading Fluency in Early Elementary School Children. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43, 336-354.

Miller, J. & Schwanenflugel, P. J. (2006). Prosody of Syntactically Complex Sentences in the Oral Reading of Young Children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98, 839-843.

Schwanenflugel, P. J., Hamilton, A. M., Kuhn, M. R., Wisenbaker, J. M., & Stahl, S. A. (2004). Becoming a fluent reader: Reading skill and prosodic features in the oral reading of young readers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96, 119–129.