Selecting the “Right” Reading Method

Presenting the Continuum of Modeling Reading Methods, a simple device you can use to select the best strategy to help struggling readers.

BY MARIE CARBO

One of the reasons why many children “fall through the cracks” in language learning programs is that they aren’t receiving sufficient modeling when they need it.

At the National Reading Styles Institute, we’ve trained thousands of teachers in the use of a simple device called the Continuum of Modeling Methods. Many of them report amazing reading gains with children who previously had experienced difficulty in learning to read, especially youngsters with a limited command of English.

The idea behind the Continuum is simple yet powerful. Children who are not independent readers, especially those who are reading well below their potential, need frequent modeling of high interest materials. In modeling, a competent reader reads aloud high interest text, while a less able reader listens to and looks at the words being read.

Too little, too fast. Many emerging readers simply do not receive the amount and kind of modeling they require; they are pushed along too fast. They desperately need to hear good reading modeled repeatedly before they try to read on their own, but often they don’t receive it.

There are many different modeling methods. I’ve included several of the more popular ones on my Continuum. Those methods that provide the most modeling of a text before the student reads it independently are at the bottom of the Continuum. As we move up, each method provides the student with less modeling. At the very top is sustained silent reading (SSR). At this point, the student receives no modeling.

Using the Continuum. In general, provide your less able readers with many opportunities to hear and see good reading being modeled. Use your “kid-watching” skills to determine where to place a child on the Continuum.

For example, if you notice that two children are struggling because they can’t read the materials during choral reading, that’s a clue that choral reading is an inappropriate method for those two children for that particular passage. Solution: Simply move down the Continuum and try any of the methods listed below choral reading. Each method listed — repeated reading, recorded books and shared reading — provides more modeling than does choral reading.

Here’s another example: Suppose you observe two of your students doing paired reading. Josefina can read the passage with ease, while David is having great difficulty.

Let’s look at the Continuum for help. We want David to get enough modeling so that

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Continuum of Modeling Reading Methods

An easy-to-follow chart that will enable you to select the most appropriate reading strategy, depending upon the ability of the student

The goal of the modeling strategies on this continuum is reading alone with ease and enjoyment. Moving from bottom to top, each strategy requires increasingly more reading independence of the student and less modeling by the teacher. Teachers should select the strategy that is most appropriate for a student or group. Generally, strategies that provide the most modeling should be used with beginning readers and those who cannot read a particular text with good fluency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Teacher Involvement</th>
<th>High Student Independence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustained Silent Reading</strong></td>
<td>Each person in the classroom, including the teacher, reads alone. The time period for a group can range from 10 to 45 minutes per session, depending on the interests, age and abilities of the students. A strong emphasis is placed on self-selection of reading materials and reading for pleasure.</td>
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<td><strong>Paired Reading</strong></td>
<td>Two students take turns reading a passage or story. Teachers may pair youngsters of similar or dissimilar reading abilities and/or interests, or children may select partners. An emphasis may be placed on reading for pleasure, or students may be given guidelines for assisting or evaluating their partner.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Choral Reading</strong></td>
<td>Two or more students read a passage in unison. Less able readers try to follow the reading model provided by the more adept readers in the group. Group members may be teachers, parents, students, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Neurological Impress</strong></td>
<td>The teacher sits behind the youngster and reads into the child’s ear. Both hold the book and read in unison. The child places his/her finger under the line of print being read by the teacher. The purpose is improving reading fluency, and no questions about reading are asked. (Heckelman, 1969)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Repeated Reading</strong></td>
<td>After discussing a passage, the teacher reads it aloud while the student (or group) follows along in the text. Then the teacher reads the first sentence aloud, and the student reads it back. This procedure continues until the passage is completed. In another version, Samuels (1979) recommended repeated, independent practice of easy passages until the student attains a reading rate of 85 wpm.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Recorded Books</strong></td>
<td>The youngster listens one or more times to a word-for-word recording while following along in the text, and then reads some or all of the book aloud (Chomsky, 1976). Less able readers can listen one to three times to two- to five-minutes segments recorded at a slower-than-usual pace (about 85-90 wpm), and then read the passage aloud. Passages should be recorded with good expression, natural phrasing and clear pronunciation (Carbo, 1989).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Shared Reading</strong></td>
<td>A high-interest book, often enlarged and containing many pictures and predictable language, is placed in front of students. The teacher reads the story while pointing to the words and pausing to ask questions. After a few readings, youngsters are encouraged to read along with the teacher.</td>
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when he reads with Josefina, he can feel good about his reading abilities. If he were struggling just slightly, then it might be sufficient for him to choral-read with Josefina, but his struggle is substantial.

David is embarrassed by his low reading ability. He wants very much to read higher level materials, as his friends do. Both repeated and shared reading are possible methods, but here, too, David would need to be the pupil while some adult or peer helped him. So instead, let’s try recorded books.

(For an explanation of what’s involved in this kind of modeling, see the paragraphs below under “Recorded Books.”)

After working with the recorded book, David then reads with Josefina. With all that practice, his performance is likely to be flawless. David feels proud, and the repeated modeling has improved his sight vocabulary. The extra modeling that he received has made all the difference. And paired reading has become what it should be: an enjoyable practice of a reading passage with a peer.

From bottom to top. Let’s look at the amount and kind of modeling provided by each method on the Continuum, starting at the bottom and moving to the top.

Storytelling and reading aloud. If these methods were on the Continuum, they’d be placed below shared reading. Storytelling models oral language through stories, and reading aloud familiarizes children with the sounds and sense of written language.

Shared reading. The major purposes of this method are to motivate students to read, to help them understand that writing proceeds from left to right and to connect written and spoken language. This is done in a relaxed setting, with great enjoyment for those students who need it.

Recorded books. Both commercially-recorded books and teacher-recorded books can be used. I recommend a special method of recording that I developed for struggling readers. Here’s what you do:

If the gap between the student’s reading level and the level of the material is large, then record small amounts of the text (two to five minutes), using good expression. Record the text at a pace that’s slightly slower than usual so that you can synchronize the spoken and written word for the reader. The student usually listens to the passage two or three times in private before reading it aloud. If the reading is halting, try recording even less of the text.

Repeated reading. There are a number of variations on this method. In one, the students sees and hears text being read and immediately reads it back. In another, the student practices the material – with assistance, if needed – until he or she attains a certain speed.

Choral reading. This method is more difficult than the previous methods because the student is expected to read a passage simultaneously with others. No previous modeling need have occurred.

Paired reading. Since this method requires each student to read a different part of the text, no exact model is provided before the reading. Some modeling may occur if at least one member is a good reader.

Sustained Silent Reading. SSR is the goal of the Continuum.

Be creative. Use the Continuum in creative ways. Combine modeling methods when it makes sense to do so. For example, before children choral-read a passage, they might listen to a tape recording of it to improve their fluency. Try to place your students in experiences that will assure success for them.

Remember that all of the methods on the Continuum provide practice in reading, but some of the methods also provide modeling. Children need to spend the most time with the method or methods that will help them attain reading fluency.

When a student can read words easily and when he or she feels good about being able to read, then the child’s mind is free to understand what is being read. That’s the goal of reading.