

Fluency training for Hebrew, Judaica like aerobics for the mind

If you want to read Hebrew better, Drs. Maimonides and Lindsley have the prescription. It worked for my son Noah, then a Jewish day school fourth grader who was reading Hebrew slowly and with errors.

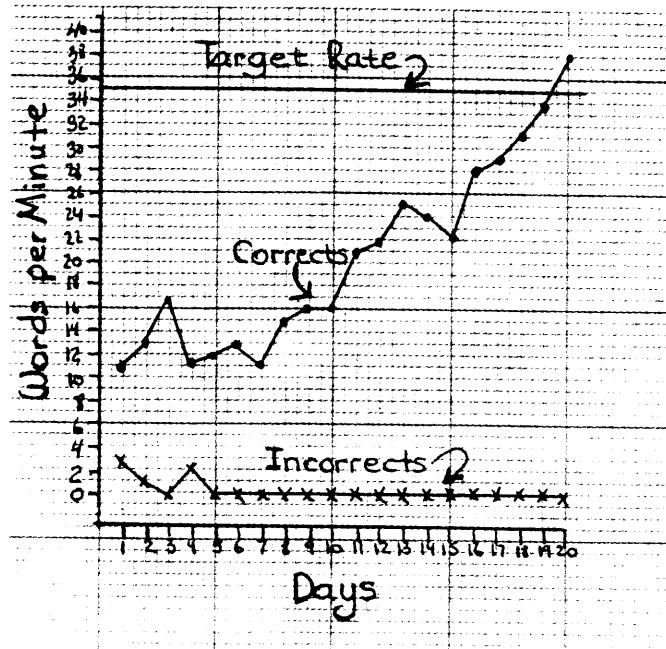
Let's begin at the beginning. First, my wife and I scheduled a serious family meeting at which 10-year-old Noah agreed to read Hebrew with supervision for 15 minutes daily.

Unfortunately, Noah usually avoided these sessions. When he did open his *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses and the prophets), he read slowly and responded with yelling and tears to my feedback. Eventually we stopped nagging Noah and negotiated a contract.

I began by having Noah time me as I read from the *Chumash*. I achieved an average of 41 words with less than one error per minute. I told Noah that I would measure his rates and offer correction as he read the *Chumash* for 15 minutes daily. Eventually we agreed on a target rate of 35 words read per minute with less than one error. Should Noah reach the goal, I promised to upgrade his personal computer.

Full speed ahead

The first sessions were excruciating. Noah read only about 11 words correctly per minute while making about three errors. He angrily noted that it had taken me 46 years to read 41 words per minute, so the 35-word target was unreasonable! Although I listened to his complaints, I did not lower the target rate. For the first six sessions, sometimes with anger and sometimes with tears, Noah read about 12 words correctly per minute.



Gradually his emotional behavior subsided and his rates improved. For the next six sessions he read about 17 words correctly per minute. He began asking to read twice daily and insisted on graphing his rates. Our horizontal axis represented sessions and the vertical showed words per minute. A conspicuous horizontal line crossed the graph at 35 words per minute, the target rate. For each session, Noah plotted the rate of "corrects" and "incorrects."

Although his rates did not uniformly improve, within 12 sessions he was correctly reading 22 words per minute. Now he imagined earning some part of the upgrade with each increase in rate. I asked why he was suddenly so eager to improve his reading. He smiled and answered, "The sooner I reach the target, the sooner I get the upgrades!"

During our 20th session, Noah read 38 words per minute with no errors. In a mere five hours, he had achieved the goal he had thought unattainable! Noah went on to use this model of fluency training in many of his secular courses and in two years of high school Hebrew (in which he achieved an A- average). He plans to continue studying Hebrew in college.

Tried-and-true approach

Using a contract and reinforcers to foster learning is an old story. In the 12th century, the Spanish rabbi/philosopher/physician Moses Maimonides recognized that many Jewish children did not study Torah.

To encourage study, the Rambam offered figs or other valued foods as immediate reinforcers. As the students advanced and their preferences changed, he switched the reinforcers to clothing, money and then delayed prizes such as the prestige derived from

Marshall Lev
Dermer is an
associate profes-
sor of psychology
at the University
of Wisconsin-
Milwaukee. He
continues to read
from the
Chumash at the
rate of 41 words
per minute

.Continued on page 36

becoming a respected scholar.

Eight centuries later, B.F. Skinner advocated reinforcement to foster learning. Ogden Lindsley, one of Skinner's students, advocated that the best measure of learning is the rate of correct responding: fluency. Yet most educators emphasize the amount correct.

They're missing something. The intensive practice required to develop fluency produces behavior that lasts and responses that can be combined in novel ways.

For example, the Judaica student who can recite the classic answers to classic questions fluently is at a great advantage. The first book of the Torah, for example, raises issues including: What is Genesis' view of creation and why? What is the first thing that God describes as "not good"?

Fluency practice

Put each of these questions on one side of an index card, place the classic answers on the reverse side (see Telushkin's "Jewish Literacy"), and practice your answers. Each day, add a few questions, shuffle the deck, and try to beat your best rate. Soon you will find yourself with much Torah at the tip of your tongue. Months later, you'll find that you're able to answer questions that you have not studied — such as "What is God's attitude towards celibacy?" — by applying your knowledge.

Fluency training has many applications. Each evening several years ago, I set aside one minute and typed as many positive attributes about myself as possible. At first, I could enter 12 attributes per minute. Eventually I reached 31.

To improve my rate, I practiced during the day — intentionally at first. Gradually, I found myself spontaneously practicing in the car, while walking and when going to sleep.

I discovered that practicing to increase my entry rate was reducing the time I spent worrying. Stated another way, worrying about serious things like cancer running in the family had been replaced with worrying about something trivial like improving my entry rate.

Do I ever worry now? Sure, but through fluency training I can control my worrying. I literally count my blessings — as fast as I can. ■