RUNNING HEAD: Reader’s Theater and Fluency

READER’S THEATER AND INCREASED FLUENCY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

By

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Submitted to
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Submitted in Fulfillment for the Requirements for
61-683 Research Paper
Spring 2013
February 23, 2014
Abstract

This study was completed to find out if there is a significant difference in the practice of Reader’s Theater to improve fluency in a third grade elementary classroom. The rationale for improving fluency instruction during leveled reading instruction time is based on the importance of fluency for all children. Through the study it was found that students who practiced Reader’s Theater regularly improved their fluency on the Three-Minute Reading Assessment, composed by Timothy Rasinski and Nancy Padak. The scores of these students were from the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2013. It was also found there was not a significant difference in student’s oral fluency in mean scores between the non-practice of reader’s theater and practice of reader’s theater when comparing students from the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school year. It was expected that through the use of reader’s theater, students overall fluency scores would increase. This study found that students in the 2012-2013 school year did improve their fluency through the use of Reader’s Theater, but it was not a significant difference compared to the students who did not participate in Reader’s Theater during 2011-2012.
Introduction

Background, Issues and Concerns

A suburban third grade classroom in a school district in the Midwest hereby referred to as FOSD, had concerns about student fluency. Each school year, students’ oral fluency is checked three times a year to monitor increases or decreased in fluency. The data is used to evaluate best practices in teaching fluency. This project involved using reader’s theater to monitor and improve student’s oral fluency in a third grade classroom. According to S. Jay Samuel’s article, “The Method of Repeated Readings,” student’s fluency improves through repeated reading of a text (Samuels, 1997). Reader’s theater gives students a purpose to re-read a text multiple times. Through the use of repeated readings, students will improve their expression intonation, and inflection while rehearsing the text.

Practice under Investigation

The practice under investigation is the use of reader’s theater in a third grade elementary classroom and the effects of fluency. The data performed by the FOSD on fluency will be used to determine if the use of reader’s theater makes a positive impact on oral fluency.

School Policy to be Informed by Study

The FOSD began implementing the Common Core State Standards in 2012, and these standards address the importance of fluency. English Language Arts Standard RF 3.4b states that students should be able to, “read grade-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings” (National Governors
Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). Teachers should implement the best practices to teach fluency.

*Conceptual Underpinning*

Fluency is an important part of reading curriculum. Tim Rasinski states “scholars define reading fluency as the ability to read the words in a text with sufficient accuracy, automaticity, and prosody to lead to good comprehension” (as cited in Young & Rasinski, 2009, p. 4). Reader’s theater increases student fluency throughout the practice of repeated readings, authentic purpose for reading, and expression. “Reading requires readers to accomplish at least two critical tasks—they must decode the words and comprehend the text” (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004, p. 126). Repeated reading has been studied in depth by S. Jay Samuels. In his article, *The Method of Repeated Readings* (1979), it was shown that accuracy as well as comprehension was improved throughout repeated readings. Samuels (1979) stated that comprehension can be poor with the first reading but with each additional rereading the student is able to better comprehend because the decoding barrier to comprehension s gradually overcome. Often times the passages read were short. Reader’s theater is a good example of a text that can be used for repeated readings. Not only are many parts short, but also there is also increased motivation to reread each script. Students know the end goal of Reader’s Theater is to read their part in front of an audience. Overall, through the implementation of reader’s theater, students will improve their accuracy, automaticity, and comprehension while reading a text as well as gain confidence and motivation.

Expression, also called prosody, is likewise influenced throughout the use of reader’s theater. “Prosody refers to the ability of readers to render a text with appropriate
expression and phrasing to reflect the semantic and syntactic content of the passage,” (Young & Rasinski, 2009, p. 4). It is up to the student to interpret the text to fully express the meaning to the audience. Students work together or independently to determine the importance of the text, and where to add meaning. Fluent readers should simply sound like they are speaking naturally. Reader’s theater can improve student fluency in a variety of instructional methods. Through the use of modeling plus practicing repeated readings and expression students can become fluent readers.

Statement of the Problem

There is a need for a classroom literacy program that allows for a positive way to implement fluency. When reading aloud, students often lack expression because there has not been a focus on individual fluency. Through the use of reader’s theater, the goal is to change students’ viewpoints on fluency, and encourage them to read with expression. By increasing motivation and expression, the student’s overall fluency will improve.

Purpose of the Study

To find out if the use and practice of Reader’s Theater improves fluency in a third grade elementary classroom.

Research Question(s)

RQ#1: Is there a significant difference in student’s fluency between students being taught with Reader’s Theater scripts compared to students not being taught with Reader’s Theater scripts?

RQ#2: Is there a significant difference in student’s oral fluency score in the fall compared to student’s oral fluency score in the spring?
Null Hypotheses

H₀. There is no significant difference in student’s fluency between students being taught with Reader’s Theater scripts compared to students not being taught with Reader’s Theater scripts.

H₀. There is no significant difference in student’s oral fluency in the fall compared to student’s oral fluency score in the spring.

Anticipated Benefits of the Study

If there is a difference in student’s fluency through the use of Reader’s Theater, teachers will need to implement this strategy to improve fluency. The benefits will also include determining best practice for developing fluency.

Definition of Terms

Reader’s Theater – scripts read aloud by multiple students; students work collaboratively to perform and practice script. The goal is to read the script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action.

Common Core State Standards – Standards developed for English Language Arts and Mathematics to be used nation-wide, to provide a clear and consistent understanding of what students should learn.

Summary

The third grade classroom in the FOSD is composed of seventeen children. The school practices the use of improving fluency through reading aloud. Students are leveled according to their current reading level, which is determined by grade equivalency. Students then go to a specific classroom to receive more individualized teaching for thirty minutes. Students in the project’s class are able to read materials that
are often much higher than what most third grade students can read and comprehend. The lessons focus on different skills that aid their comprehension, accuracy, and fluency while reading. Since this group of students is above grade level, they are challenged to continue to grow academically. This research investigates the implementation of reader’s theater during this block of time, and the impact it has on the Three-Minute Reading Assessment given three times year. Finally, the research will decide if this practice should be implemented in other third grade classrooms to improve fluency.
Review of Literature

Oral reading is an integral part of teaching reading in the elementary schools. Walk into most classrooms and students will be seen spending a portion of the day reading aloud. This creates a dire need for effective teaching of fluency strategies to prepare students for future endeavors. Dr. Tim Rasinski (2010) states that it is important to use fluency practices that engage students because if we continue to use practices that fail to engage students’ minds and hearts we will not motivate students to persist in doing the work to understand challenging texts and ideas. Rasinski (2010) also explains how students need to understand how being a fluent reader does not mean that they can read quickly, it means that they know when to take control of reading rate for a variety of texts and purposes. A reader’s fluency is not merely measured by the rate at which the student reads, it is also measured by expression and phrasing. Reader’s theater, if used properly, can improve fluency and increase motivation to read aloud with most students.

In order to truly assess reader’s theater, there must be a common definition of reading fluently. Rasinski, Padak, McKeon, Wilfong, Friedauer, & Heim (2005) define reading fluently as “reading with appropriate accuracy and rate but also with good and meaningful phrasing and expression” (p. 28). Garrett and O’Connor (2010) in their article, Reader’s Theater: Hold on Let’s Read it Again, define fluency as, “rate at which an individual reads” (p. 7). The article also states that in order to become a fluent reader, “accurate decoding, automaticity in word recognition, and prosody: the phrasing, intonation, and pitch associated with reading a passage aloud,” must be addressed (p. 7). Black and Stave (2007) also agree that fluency is the ability to read accurately with
expression, pacing and ease. Overall, most researchers agree that fluency is an assembling of rate, accuracy, and expression.

What makes reader’s theater special from other fluency practices is that it does not solely focus on increasing a student’s reading rate. Instead there is an additional focus on teaching students how to phrase text and read with expression. In order to accomplish these tasks, student must repeatedly read a text. Repeated reading, or oral practice, can lead to improved word recognition, fluency, comprehension, and overall reading performance (Rasinski, 2010). Reader’s theater can be used as a tool to practice repeated reading because it is already set up in a format in which students can repeat reading a specific text. The theory behind repeated readings began with the automaticity theory, which states that a fluent reader decodes text automatically, which is without attention; therefore it leaves attention free to be used for comprehension (Samuels, 1997). Many beginning readers focus on decoding, and there is not room left to comprehend a text. With practice, through repeated readings, comprehension issues can be addressed. Improved comprehension comes from students understanding the phrasing and context of a sentence. Through increased comprehension, student’s expression can also be improved. Reader’s theater gives students a purpose to review a text multiple times, and increases motivation to reread the text.

Although reader’s theater does not only focus on a reader’s rate, it is also still important to take rate into consideration when teaching fluency. Timothy Rasinski states that reading rate can be a tool for assessing students’ performance (Rasinski, 2000). Rasinski and his colleague, Nancy Padak, examined children grades 2-5 that were referred for Title I reading services in Akron, Ohio public schools, to see if slow reading
is present in struggling readers. These students read a passage at their grade level and one below their grade level. Their findings were that the student’s word recognition and comprehension were, on average, at frustration level. However, the students were near instructional-level, and it wouldn’t take much improvement to increase their performance (Rasinski, 2000). Rasinski also found that slow and labored reading rates were a reason some teachers thought students needed to be recommended for Title I services, and although most teachers agree that if a student understands the text they read, the reading rate shouldn’t matter. Rasinski agreed with the latter statement, but he also believed that the reading rate, or speed, couldn’t be ignored, because it is an indicator as slow processing of the text (Rasinski, 2010). Struggling students can benefit from repeated readings to help with fluency and rate. Excessively slow reading leads to reading frustration, and teachers need to meet the needs of students by avoiding frustration level. Through the use of reader’s theater, students can practice repeated reading, which will also improve their rate.

Reader’s theater is a voice-only performance, where it is the reader’s job to make the characters come to life (Vasinda & McLeod, 2011). Since there is minimal movement during reader’s theater performance, it is up to the student to interpret the text to fully express the meaning to the audience. Debby Zambo examined the benefits of reader’s theater used to provide girls a way to share their inner voice in her 2011 article, *Young Girls Discovering Their Voice with Literacy and Reader’s Theater*. The girls in this class were more likely to openly express their ideas and feelings when they heard and discussed stories with other peers. The focus for this study was more on helping young girls find the goodness inside themselves through role-playing strong female characters.
(Zambo, 2011). Not only are students reading the text with expression, they essentially understand the meaning of the text when they understand where to pause and emphasize certain pieces of the text. There can be a deeper motivation when reading scripts because students have to essentially become a character, which creates a need for students to comprehend the text.

Throughout the process of implementing reader’s theater in the classroom, students will gain additional understanding about many skills that will benefit more than just the area of reading. Student’s oral communication skills will be addressed, as students will be reading aloud in front of other students. Blake and Stave (2007) shared the importance of students speaking clearly and enunciating in order to help listeners understand what is said. Reader’s theater is teaching students how to become successful speakers as well as readers. The variety of texts that can be read also opens up children to many new ideas and information. Due to the variety of texts, student’s vocabulary and schema is increased. Students may come across many unknown words in a text, and while they are with a group of peers, they can collaborate to understand the meaning of unknown words. Partner reading the text was utilized by Lorraine Griffith (2004), and she saw great gains in trust and friendship while students were working on reading scripts together. Reader’s theater texts are not only fictional stories, but they can incorporate poems, songs, and a variety of other literature. Students reading fiction and non-fiction text can increase their knowledge of a wide range of topics. Through this wide range of literature, students are exposed to a variety of language structures. The more often reader’s theater is incorporated into the classroom the better able students will be able to pick up on the differences in language structure. Students may become more aware of
language and its structure, especially syntax or the knowledge of word order, phrasing and grammar (Blake & Stave, 2007). Reader’s theater covers a wide range of skills to enhance a student’s fluency and overall schema.

Another unique aspect of reader’s theater is that it can lead to improved reading fluency regardless of whether students are striving or thriving (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Many researchers have found that reader’s theater increases student’s comprehension and fluency. For example, Chase Young, a second-grade classroom teacher in Texas, used reader’s theater as part of his reading curriculum for the first time in the 2007–2008 school year. At the end of the school year, “the average gain by Chase’s students was close to double these normal gains: by the end of the school year the average student reading rate was at 127.6 WCPM (an increase of nearly 65 words), which lies between the 75th and 90th percentiles” (Young & Rasinski, 2009, p. 10). It was clear that students in his class had substantially greater gains than that of normal second-grade students. Students also scored above level on the DRA, with an average of 31.2 (the goal for second grade at the end of the year is a score of 28). Not only did reader’s theater improve these student’s quantitative scores, but it also helped increased positive motivation in the classroom (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox (2009) also discovered motivation and confidence improved through the use of reader’s theater through their study of three fourth grade readers of varying reading abilities. Not only are comprehension and fluency influenced, but also motivation through the implementation of reader’s theater.

Other researchers who saw improvements through the implementation of reader’s theater were Tracy Garrett and Dava O’Connor. In their 2010 article, Reader’s Theater:
Hold on Let’s Read it Again, the focus was on special education classrooms in three rural southeastern elementary schools. There were a wide variety of instructional methods to teach reader’s theater such as class within a class to small group instruction. At the end of the year, all students in the study improved in letter recognition, text levels, fluency and comprehension (Garret & O’Connor, 2010).

In summary, the use of reader’s theater in a classroom has been found to improve student’s fluency and comprehension. Some of the basic skills that are enhanced during reader’s theater are the following: oral communication, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary development, language structure, and collaboration. Students are also motivated to read, write, speak, listen and view throughout the process of reader’s theater. There must be teacher guidance throughout the process, but with support and repeated practice students can increase their reading comprehension, fluency and internal motivation when the practice of reader’s theater is applied.
Research Methods

Research Design

A quantitative study was conducted to see if there was a difference between student’s oral fluency with the implementation of Reader’s Theater. The independent variable was the status of the students either being involved with Reader’s Theater or not being involved in Reader’s Theater. The dependent variable was the oral fluency scores. Another aspect of the study was deciphering if there is a difference between fall and spring oral fluency scores. The independent variable was fall or spring. The dependent variable was oral fluency scores. The alpha level was set at 0.25 for all tests with this research. If the difference is found significant in scores based on oral fluency, teachers should be informed and implement Reader’s Theater to improve oral fluency.

Study Group Description

Seventeen students in third grade from the FOSD who scored above a 3rd grade reading level were chosen as the group evaluated. The reading level score was determined from a standardized test completed by all third grade students. For the first subgroup, the GATES reading assessment was used, and for the second subgroup the STAR reading assessment was used. Both standardized tests are comparable, and produce reading grade-level equivalent results. In the FOSD, seventeen students attended a Title 1 school. Fifty-two percent of students in the school are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The school is primarily white in ethnicity, with below five percent ethnicity in Hispanic, American Indian, and African American.
Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data is collected from the FOSD from the previously mentioned seventeen students in third grade on the Three-Minute Reading Assessment, composed by Timothy Rasinski and Nancy Padak. Scores were taken from 2011-2012 and 2012-2013.

Statistical Analysis Methods

A t-test was conducted to find if there is a significant difference in oral fluency scores based on the use and practice of Reader’s Theater. The source was broken into two categories: practice of reader’s theater and non-practice of reader’s theater. Another t-test was conducted to find if there is a significant difference in oral fluency scores in the fall and summer of 2012-2013. The source was broken into two categories: oral fluency scores in the fall and oral fluency scores in the spring. The mean, mean D, t-test, df, and p-value were concluded from this test. The Alpha level was set at 0.25 to test the null hypotheses: there is no significant difference in student’s fluency between student’s being taught with Reader’s Theater scripts compared to student’s not being taught with Reader’s Theater scripts, as well as, there is no significant difference in student’s oral fluency in the fall compared to student’s oral fluency score in the spring.
Findings

Two t-tests were conducted to decipher whether there was a difference in oral fluency scores with or without the use of Reader’s Theater, and the difference in oral fluency scores from the fall of 2012 to the spring of 2013. Students in 2011-2012 did not have any instruction with Reader’s Theater. Students in 2012-2013 had instruction of Reader’s Theater. It is important to note that students in 2011-2012 completed a different reading assessment than the students in 2012-2013. This assessment showed the students’ overall reading level. The reading level given by the assessment was used to determine leveled groups who received reader’s theater in 2012-2013. The assessment given to the latter group was very similar to the first group. The data analyzed in this report should not be affected by the change of reading assessments. The oral fluency assessment was the same assessment for both sets of data. The following tables, graphs, and charts will depict the organized findings based on the data compiled by the FOSD during the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years.

Figure 1: t-Test Analysis Results for Non-Practice of Reader’s Theater and Practice of Reader’s Theater Student’s Oral Fluency Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean D</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Practice of Reader’s Theater (n=17)</td>
<td>124.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Reader’s Theater (n=17)</td>
<td>129.70</td>
<td>-5.12</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant when p<=0.25
As shown in Figure 1, there was not a significant difference (t-Test = 0.53; p-value = 0.53, Mean D -5.12) in mean scores between non-practice of Reader’s Theater and practice of Reader’s Theater. The null hypothesis was not rejected. There was no significant difference in student’s fluency between students being taught with Reader’s Theater scripts compared to students not being taught with Reader’s Theater scripts. Students that experienced reader’s theater instruction (Mean = 129.70) recorded a higher mean score at the end of the school year on the oral fluency assessment compared to students taught non-practice of Reader’s Theater scripts (Mean =124.58). Although, when compared to the criterion p-value of 0.25 there was not a significant difference in mean scores. These finding suggest that there is not a significant difference in student’s fluency through the use of Reader’s Theater, so teachers will not need to implement this strategy to improve fluency.

Figure 2: Pie Chart Results for Non-Practice of Reader’s Theater and Practice of Reader’s Theater Student’s Oral Fluency Scores
A little less than 50% of the pie chart represents students who did not practice Reader’s Theater scripts and it shows that these students scored a mean of 124.58 on the oral fluency assessment. The students who did practice Reader’s Theater scored a small percentage above 50% on the pie chart, with a mean score of 129.70. The difference between the scores did not provide a significant difference in the practice of Reader’s Theater to improve fluency.

Figure 3: t-Test Analysis Results for Student’s Practicing Reader’s Theater Fall and Spring Oral Fluency Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean D</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2012 (n=17)</td>
<td>115.41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring 2013 (n=17)</td>
<td>129.71</td>
<td>-14.3</td>
<td>-2.49</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant when p<=0.25

As shown in Figure 3, there was a significant difference (t-Test = 0.02; p-value = 0.02, Mean D -14.3) in mean scores between fall 2012 and spring 2013 oral fluency scores. The null hypothesis was rejected. Students (Fall 2012 Mean = 115.41) recorded a higher mean score at the end of the school year on the oral fluency assessment after the practice of Reader’s Theater scripts (Spring 2013 Mean =129.71) when compared to the criterion p-value of 0.25. These finding suggest that there is a significant difference in student’s fluency through the use of Reader’s Theater, so teachers should implement this strategy to improve fluency.
The mean of students in the fall of 2012 who practiced Reader’s Theater was 115.41. These students improved their fluency score in the spring by a mean difference of 14.3 points. The difference between the scores proved to be a significant difference. This shows that in the practice of Reader’s Theater improves fluency in the students assessed in 2012-2013.
Conclusions and Recommendations

The outcomes reported from this study show that the use of Reader’s Theater does not influence the outcome of student fluency when comparing students above grade level. The null hypothesis was not rejected in the first study, which showed there was not a significant difference between students from 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 and their fluency scores. The t-test results from these two schools years indicated a $p$-value $= 0.53$. Since the value was greater than the set $p$-value of 0.25, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

The students in 2012-2013 did show growth from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, with a $p$-value $= 0.02$. This rejected the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in student’s oral fluency in the fall compared to student’s oral fluency score in the spring. Although, other factors, besides Reader’s Theater, could have addressed fluency during this school year, the student’s fluency score did increase. An outside factor that could have improved fluency was that these readers were already higher level readers, and this could partially be the reason why the scores between 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 did not show a significant difference. These students read for enjoyment outside of school which would also increase their fluency. Theorist S.J. Samuels explained that repeated readings also improve fluency. These higher level readers who read frequently and repeatedly would naturally improve their fluency.

It was expected that the students who did perform Reader’s Theater scripts would improve their fluency slightly more than those who did not. From the research, there was not a significant difference between the two groups, although the second group did show growth from the fall oral fluency scores to spring oral fluency scores.
The assessment used to compare fluency measured the student’s rate and accuracy. The use of Reader’s Theater also improves a student’s expression, which is not measured in the Three-Minute Reading Assessment. The conceptual underpinning of theorist Tim Rasinski supported that students who practice Reader’s Theater will improve fluency through the practice of repeated readings, authentic purpose for reading, and expression. Students who did practice Reader’s Theater in 2012-2013 increased their fluency, by practicing repeated readings and having a purpose for reading. Throughout the use of rubrics there would be data to compare if these students also improved their expression.

After concluding this study there are some further studies that could be conducted. A new measurement of fluency could be adopted by the school district to ensure a measurable view of a student’s fluency. A fluency assessment that measures a student’s rate, accuracy, and expression would prove to be more effective. A study could then be performed to see if these findings are still accurate. Questions have also formulated about the level of readers that were identified for this study. Reader’s Theater could help struggling reader’s improve their fluency significantly compared to on-level readers. It would be beneficial to compare struggling readers who participate in Reader’s Theater versus those who do not participate. There could also be a district wide study to see if these findings are true for the school district as a whole.

In order to complete a larger study, professional development would be required in order to ensure all teachers are properly educated on Reader’s Theater practices. Modeling and repeated readings would need to be reviewed and covered in depth. A rubric could also be used to ensure all students were measured fairly throughout the
study. Overall, Reader’s Theater provides a positive and encouraging way to practice fluency skills. Even though this study did not find that there was a significant difference between the practice and non-practice of Reader’s Theater, it is still a debatable practice to improve fluency.
References


