

Reading Horizons

Volume 28, Issue 4

1988

Article 5

JULY 1988

Making Repeated Readings a Functional Part Of Classroom Reading Instruction

Timothy Rasinski*

*University of Georgia, Athens

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Abstract

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MAKING REPEATED READINGS A FUNCTIONAL PART OF CLASSROOM READING INSTRUCTION

TIMOTHY RASINSKI

University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

Reading instruction, in recent years, has not been overly concerned with the development of reading fluency in students. Although seen as a crucial element in proficient reading (Allington, 1983; Harris & Sipay, 1985), it is often a neglected part of the reading curriculum. Survey just about any basal reader series and you will find relatively little attention given to fluency development. Indeed, Allington (1983) has called fluency the "neglected goal" of reading instruction, and Anderson (1981) has identified it as the "missing ingredient" in the reading program. Thus, to a large extent, if fluency is to be a part of the reading program it is up to individual reading teachers to see that it is included.

One successful strategy for developing fluency has been Samuels' (1979) method of repeated readings. The method essentially has children reread a particular text until a criterion level of speed and word recognition accuracy is achieved. The method embodies the old saying "practice makes perfect." Several studies have demonstrated the usefulness of repeated readings as a way to improve fluency. Repeated Readings has been associated with more accurate and faster reading (Carver & Hoffman, 1981; Samuels, 1979), more sophisticated textual phrasing (Schreiber, 1980), and better comprehension (Samuels, 1979).

The method works, there is little doubt about that. The problem, however, arises when teachers are asked to implement repeated readings in a regular classroom setting. In talking with teachers about repeated readings, I am often asked the question, "How can I get my students to

reread a text that I have trouble getting them to read one time through?" or "Won't they get bored having to reread passages over and over?" The typical response to this dilemma has been some sort of reinforcement strategy. Students monitor their own or a classmate's performance, graph changes in fluency, and thus provide demonstrable and motivational evidence of reading progress. A more behavioral response has been to reward students for each reading or each passage for which the criterion levels were achieved with some sort of token or prize.

In each of these cases, however, the novelty of the motivation often wears off in short order, students balk at having to read something more than once, and the teacher is back on square one. The central problem with the previously mentioned motivational devices is that they fail to take into account the real purpose for reading--to learn, to enjoy, to gain meaning. Students often fail to connect the rereading they are asked to do with some purpose that is functional and meaningful within their real life experiences. Because of this students often see repeated reading as a meaningless school task.

Making It Meaningful

Fortunately, repeated readings does not need to be tied to some extrinsic reinforcer. There are ways that teachers can set up repeated readings so that it is done within a meaningful and purposeful context. It is essential that students do repeated readings in ways they see as natural and functional in their school lives. I would like to share some alternative ways for inviting students into the repeated readings experience.

1. Repeated read-aloud. Anyone who has read a text aloud in front of a group knows that practice is required for a good performance. One of life's most embarrassing moments can be reading something aloud without the benefit of a rehearsal.

Creating real situations in which students are asked to read texts aloud to a group requires repeated readings of the text in order to gain fluency for the performance. Students may be asked to share a short story or passage with the class or a small group each week during story hour. The students might also be asked to read a particularly

well-suited story to a group of students at a lower grade level.

2. Storytelling. Many people enjoy listening to stories, but few people are actual storytellers. The stories that storytellers tell often come from books. In order to be able to tell the story well, storytellers have to read the particular story they intend to tell several times through.

Encourage students to become storytellers. Have a storytelling hour every week so that students can share the stories they practice. In the process of learning their story, the students will be involved in repeated readings. They will also develop a greater affection for stories.

3. Poetry. One part of the reading curriculum that is often overlooked is poetry. Children need to learn an appreciation for this special form of language. And, when children are asked to share a poem with the class through an oral presentation other good things happen. Reading poetry requires an attention to phrasing and expression. In order to read a poem with proper use of stress, tone, juncture, and phrasing repeated readings of the poem are a must.

4. Drama. In order to put on a play, actors need to know their lines very well. This can only be done by numerous readings and run-throughs of the script. Actors willingly invest plenty of time in reading and rereading their lines. Even the youngest students enjoy a good play. They will like it even more, and learn to appreciate this art form as well, if they are periodically and actively involved in a school or classroom play.

Readers' theater is another way of enacting a play in which the actors sit in a group or circle and read the play from the scripts that they hold. It offers a less formal alternative to putting on a play. Readers' theater lets those students who are less inclined to participate in a play get actively involved in theater and repeated readings.

5. Cross-age tutoring. Students in the upper grades can be the best helpers a lower grade teacher has. These students (including those who are reading below grade level) can be employed to tutor, read with, or read to individual students in lower grades.

For the tutors to be effective they must know the

texts they are using with their tutees. To listen to the tutee read or to read with the tutee, the student tutor must read and reread the passages prior to the tutoring experience in order to know the texts well.

Cross-age tutoring can be especially helpful when the student tutors are reading below their assigned grade level. Cross-age tutoring gives less able readers natural and functional opportunities for working with texts that are written at a lower readability level. Fluency is promoted when students read passages that are at a student's independent reading level. By having the tutors work with texts at a lower readability level, practice on texts will help build power and fluence in their reading.

6. Taped readings. If an older student is unable to directly tutor a younger student, he or she may still be of help. Older students can be recruited to make taped oral readings of the books appropriate for younger students. As with cross-age tutoring, the older student must repeatedly practice the story prior to getting it on tape so that a fluent rendition of the story is recorded.

7. Songs. Good songs beg to be sung over and over. Teachers can capitalize on this by bringing songs into the classroom and providing students with written versions of the lyrics. If the students like a song, it can be one that is sung (and read) daily for several days. Students can also be asked to write their own lyrics to popular melodies. These, too, can be sung repeatedly. Repeated choral readings of appropriate and interesting passages such as limericks or song lyrics can promote fluency.

8. Shared book experience. Don Holdaway (1980) has shown the value of using big books or the shared book experience in the early elementary classroom. When students are given interesting stories to read, they demand to read them over and over. The big book setting allows students to read texts chorally as well as individually. It also gives the teacher greater flexibility in demonstrating important aspects of the text to the group. Using the shared book experience allows individual students' infatuation with certain stories to spread to the group. That infatuation often leads students to ask to read the story over and over again.

9. Read aloud. Teachers who read daily to their classes know that students enjoy hearing their favorite stories read

aloud more than once. There are many benefits to reading good stories to classes. In terms of fluency, repeated readings of a story by a teacher models fluent reading for the students. It also demonstrates concretely to children that repeated readings is a natural and enjoyable part of the reading experience and that deeper levels of understanding can be gained with each repeated reading.

10. Games. One of the striking characteristics of games is that children like to play them over and over again. Ingenious teachers can create games in which the players must read short texts in order to play the game. Board games, in the tradition of Monopoly, which have reading material on the board and in special "pick-up" cards offer students activities that are entertaining and that lead into repeated readings of the game texts.

The ideas presented here bring repeated readings to students in ways that will motivate them to reread texts in a naturally occurring way. Good readers reread texts often. They know that there is value in rereading a passage more than once when there is a real reason for doing so. Students see that, at times, repeated readings are necessary for the successful completion of a functional task. Repeated readings are a natural and integral part of real literary activities. It is the job of informed and dedicated teachers to shape functional situations that foster a motivation in students to reread texts.

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