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Maryann Mraz
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

William Nichols
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Safronia Caldwell
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Rene Beisley
Bartsville, Oklahoma Public Schools

Stephan Sargent
Northeast State University

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Maryann Mraz, William Nichols, Safronia Caldwell, Rene Beisley, Stephan Sargent, and William Rupley



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Maryann Mraz

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

William Nichols

Safronia Caldwell

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Rene Beisley

Bartlesville, Oklahoma Public Schools

Stephan Sargent

Northeast State University

William Rupley

Texas A&M University

Abstract

In order for students to learn how to construct meaning from text, teachers must apply instructional strategies that will help readers transition from simple decoding of words to fluent word identification. This article will provide an overview of the literature related to the role of fluency in reading; explain research-based recommendations for fostering fluency with struggling readers; discuss the use of repeated readings, in particular Readers Theatre, as an instructional strategy for developing fluency; and present the findings of a study in which a third-grade teacher applied Readers Theatre to improve the fluency levels of her struggling readers.

Improving Oral Reading Fluency through Readers Theatre

Reading is a process where readers strive to understand and respond to ideas that are expressed in written text. It is a complex, interactive process that consists of multiple interactions between variables such as the reader's background, reading materials, developmental levels, learning context, and learning goals to name a few (Author, 2007). Even with all these complexities, reading can be conceptualized as consisting of two separate, but highly interrelated aspects - word identification and comprehension (Hook & Jones, 2002; Pressley, 2006). As children's reading skills develop, they are expected to read words in print both effortlessly and quickly. Word recognition must become automatic: something that is done both instantly and independently in order to free up cognitive processes for higher level comprehension and connections with texts (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). They cannot take time to analyze or decode every word they encounter if the goal is higher level thought processes and enjoyment of reading (Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, & Lerner, 2002). With practice, the beginning reader becomes a more fluent reader, learning more and more sight words, so that those words can be recognized at a glance (Unrau, 2004).

Struggling with word identification can be a hindrance to constructing meaning. Many struggling readers have difficulty moving to a level of fluency that allows them to easily comprehend what they are reading. If students cannot recognize a substantial number of words encountered while reading texts, then their reading becomes laborious and slow; the comprehension of the text declines (Hoffman & Isaac, 1991; Levine, 2002; National Reading Panel, 2000; Stanovich, 1993/1994). It is well established that a reader's ability to effectively comprehend what they are reading is significantly affected by difficulties in fluent and automatic word recognition (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; May, 1998; Stanovich, 1993/1994). In fact, mild difficulties in word identification can draw a student's focus away from the underlying meaning, reduce the reading rate, create the need to reread selections in order to grasp meaning, and decrease the overall enjoyment of the experience.

When successful readers read aloud, not only do they read fluently and with adequate speed, they also use appropriate phrasing, intonation; their oral reading mirrors their spoken language. The opposite is true of struggling readers. Their reading tends to be evidenced by a slow, halting, and inconsistent rate; poor phrasing; and deficient intonation patterns that convey a lack of understanding of the text's intent (Dowhower, 1989). Slow reading requires the reader to take more time to complete a reading task than students who are fluent decreasing their exposure to

more reading situations.

Many teachers provide systematic and synthetic phonics instruction to compensate for initial reading problems experienced by struggling readers. Often, these students become accurate decoders, but fail to reach the level of fluency needed to become efficient readers (Allington, 1983). Fluency can be viewed as a stepping-stone to comprehension, and it has been found to impact comprehension in the primary grades and beyond (Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnson, 2009). In order for students to learn to construct meaning from text, it is necessary for teachers to apply instructional strategies that will help readers transition from simple decoding of words to fluent word identification.

The repeated reading method, which is used with Readers Theatre, is one research-based strategy that has been shown to increase children's fluency. Rereading the same passage repeatedly has been found to have a positive impact on both fluency and comprehension (Dowhower, 1989; Hoffman & Isaacs, 1991; Samuels, 1997). Additionally, Readers Theatre is purported to be an effective strategy providing practice in oral reading for struggling readers in a non-threatening environment (an environment in which they can gain confidence in and a self-efficacy for oral reading (Tyler & Chard, 2000).

This article will provide an overview of the literature related to the role of fluency in reading; explain research-based recommendations for fostering fluency with struggling readers; and discuss the use of repeated readings, in particular Readers Theatre, as an instructional strategy for developing fluency. The implementation and outcomes of one teacher's experience implementing Reader's Theatre with her class of struggling third-grade readers will be presented.

The Role of Fluency in Reading

A review of research associated with reading fluency substantiates that fluency is an essential component that supports the goal of reading comprehension (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Author, 2009). Fluency affords the reader the ability to develop control over surface-level text processing in order that the reader can focus on understanding the deeper levels of meaning that are embedded in the text (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). If children are to interact meaningfully with a variety of text, they must be competent in word recognition, read at a suitable rate, and understand how to project the phrasing and expression of the spoken word upon the written word (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991).

A theory that is particularly important in fluency development is the theory of automaticity in reading (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Young and Rasinski (2009)

define automaticity as, “the ability of proficient readers to read the words in a text correctly and effortlessly so that they may use their finite cognitive resources to attend the meaning while reading” (p. 4). According to automaticity theory, readers are required to engage simultaneously in two critical tasks: decoding the words and comprehending the text. Due to the limited amount of attention available to any reader, attention that is devoted to the decoding of words cannot also be used for constructing meaning. Therefore, readers who require considerable cognitive effort for decoding might compromise comprehension due to their inability to devote a sufficient amount of attention to understanding the text. Automaticity of word recognition plays a key role in the development of fluency (Author, 2009).

A second theoretical component of reading fluency lies in the role of prosody: The ability of the reader to read with appropriate intonation, expression, and phrasing (Schreiber, 1991; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Fluent readers not only demonstrate accurate and automatic word recognition, they also read with good phrasing as well as expression. The prosody component of reading fluency stresses the appropriate use of expression and phrasing (Dowhower, 1989; Richards, 2000; Schreiber, 1991; Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker, & Stahl, 2004) as well as reflects an understanding of meaningful phrasing and syntax (the way words are organized in sentences and passages) (Rasinski, 2000). The prosodic reader reads text in a manner that expressively and naturally reflects spoken language (Author, 2005). Thus, meaning of the script is conveyed through their oral interpretation of the passage. When this happens, readers are engaged and motivated to read fluently. While reading rate often receives a disproportionate degree of emphasis in fluency instruction and assessment, recent studies emphasize the importance of prosody in reading fluency and suggest a causal link between prosody and comprehension (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnson, 2009; Whalley & Hansen, 2006).

Engagement theory provides another underlying principle of reading fluency. Students need to be motivated to engage in practice that enables them to increase their fluency. Therefore, readers demonstrate prosody as they engage in reading text fluently. As students learn to read in a meaningful and expressive fashion they are also learning to construct meaning (Kuhn, 2004/2005; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). Fluency, then, serves as a bridge between word identification and comprehension (Rasinski, 2004). Because fluent readers are able to identify words automatically and accurately, they are able to focus most of their attention on other components of reading, particularly comprehension. They focus on doing all the things that good readers do – making meaning from the text, connecting it to their prior knowledge, elaborating and reflecting on concepts presented.

The word identification of struggling readers, on the other hand, has not become automatic (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974); it has not yet reached a point where it is quick and accurate. Struggling readers must focus much of their attention on recognizing the words in the text. They cannot consistently identify words rapidly; therefore, they may read word-by-word, sometimes repeating or skipping words. They will often group words in ways that are unlike natural speech. As a result, non-fluent readers have little attention to devote to comprehension (Dowhower, 1989; Nathan & Stanovich, 1991; NRP, 2000; Rasinski, 2004; Rasinski & Padak, 1994; Stanovich, 1993/94; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Unrau, 2004; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991). Inadequate capacity for comprehension robs reading of its inherent enjoyment due to so few available resources left over in the brain from high demand on word recognition. This leads to less involvement in reading-related activities. Lack of exposure and practice leads to further delays of development of automaticity and speed at the word recognition level for ineffective readers (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991).

Stanovich (1986) demonstrates the importance of fluency through his connection of the Matthew Effect to reading development. In brief, the Matthew Effect reflects the familiar saying that, “the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.” When applied to reading development, this means that good readers become increasingly motivated to read, receive instruction that focuses on higher order comprehension skills, acquire additional cognitive skills through the process of frequent reading, and are expected to achieve more. Poor readers, by contrast, read less and their instruction is predominantly centered around phonetic and word recognition skills instead of comprehension. Reading isn’t enjoyable; therefore, it is avoided preventing development in fluency and vocabulary that comes from wide reading. To complicate matters for the student struggling with fluency, beginning in second and third grade, the type of text being read in classroom settings typically shifts from primarily narrative to both narrative and expository, and the language complexity of the written text, including vocabulary level, sentence complexity, and text structure, begins to increase dramatically. Students who struggle in developing fluent reading will be further disadvantaged by the increasing difficult texts they will encounter.

Fostering Fluency in Struggling Readers through Repeated Readings

Students with reading problems need numerous opportunities to read if they are to achieve fluent word recognition. Unfortunately, many low-performing readers do not enjoy reading and avoid it as much as possible. This results in their inability to develop good sight word vocabulary. In turn, sight word deficiency causes reading to be more difficult. Thus, a vicious cycle develops (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991).

So, the question becomes: How can teachers increase fluency and, thereby, enhance comprehension and enjoyment of reading?

Current research has given us some direction about methods that effectively increase fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000). Some of these methods include modeling, tape-recorded assistance, choral reading, paired oral reading, buddy reading, and repeated reading (Rasinski, 1989; Richards, 2000). Repeated reading has been identified by the National Reading Panel (2000) as a widely used instructional approach for building reading fluency. Reading the same passage repeatedly has been shown to significantly increase reading rate and accuracy, comprehension, and the benefits are carried over to unpracticed texts (Dowhower, 1989; Hoffman & Isaacs, 1991; Rasinski, 2004; Rasinski, 2000; Rasinski & Padak, 1994; Samuels, 1997; Schreiber, 1991; Tyler & Chard, 2000). The repeated readings method is effective with older students as well as with elementary school-age children (Dowhower, 1989). It can be an excellent motivational device because it increases the level of confidence in struggling readers as it increases their level of reading ability (Samuels, 1979).

The basic format for repeated reading was developed by Samuels (1979) based on his observations of classroom reading instruction. He most often examined instruction centered on reading selections from students' basal readers. They read a new selection with new words each day. When many students were asked to read orally in class, they were unable to do so with fluency and were embarrassed by their slow, laborious reading. The pace of instruction for these students was too fast. They seldom had the opportunity to practice reading any selection more than once. This, Samuels noted, was contrary to the manner in which most people, who reach high levels of performance in a particular field, gain their abilities. People who obtain success in a given endeavor tend to practice over and over until they become proficient in their craft. When applied to building reading fluency, it follows that, rather than asking students to navigate a new text selection on a daily basis, students should, instead, be allowed time to practice reading the same selection several times if they are to reach a desired level of fluency.

Teachers, then, can do two things to help students achieve automaticity in word recognition: They can give instruction on how to accurately recognize words and they can provide the time and motivation for students to practice word recognition skills until they become automatic. A number of instructional procedures have emerged over the years from this basic repeated reading form. Yet, simply reading faster does not guarantee prosody in reading. Readers Theatre requires repeated reading but also requires intonation and phrasing aspects of prosody.

Readers Theatre

In Readers Theatre, the reader interprets the author's intended meaning through oral interpretative reading. Using the Readers Theatre technique, the student repeatedly reads short, meaningful passages until reaching a high level of fluency. The student receives explicit guidance and feedback from a fluent reader, and after reasonable success, moves to a new selection (Dowhower, 1989; Hoffman & Isaacs, 1991; May, 1998; Rasinski, 2004; 2000; Rasinski & Padak, 1994; Samuels, 1997; Schreiber, 1991; Tyler & Chard, 2000). Tierney and Readence (2000) state that Readers Theater integrates reading while providing motivation to read. According to their findings, Readers Theater allows students to improve oral reading skills, interpretative skills, and comprehension. Sloyer (1982) suggests that Readers Theater provides interpretive reading benefits for all children by allowing readers to use expressive reading to portray the characters and messages in a text. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998/99) found that the repeated readings associated with Readers Theater were viewed by students as practices and rehearsals which, in turn, made the process of repeated readings "both purposeful and fun" (1998, p. 326).

In addition to improving fluency and comprehension, Readers Theatre also engages readers and serves as a motivational tool for students. For struggling readers, motivation may be the key to their success in using this strategy. Guthrie and Humenick (2004) define a motive as "the sense of engagement in an important task". The performance of Readers Theatre becomes the important task that engages students in the repeated reading process. They suggest that, when students are motivated in a reading task, they commit cognitive energy toward reading while increasing their aesthetic experience. Readers Theatre provides students with choices about to how they will interpret the text. When students are provided with open-ended tasks that include choice; children are more interested and tend to expend more effort learning and understanding the material (Turner & Paris, 1995). By selecting Readers Theater as a vehicle for repeated readings, students are able to construct meaning from text while sustaining their motivation to do so.

Several studies have examined the impact of Readers Theatre on reading proficiency. Millan (1996) used Readers Theatre with a small group of second graders in a pull-out title I class. He found that students read faster and more fluently, had higher comprehension and had a more positive attitude toward reading as a result of Readers Theatre. In their study of second-grade, Title I students use of Readers Theatre, Millin and Rinehart (1999) observed increases in both oral reading fluency and reading achievement that transferred to other reading materials. In another study, a 10-week implementation of Readers Theatre, where a small group of second

graders were introduced to, practiced, and performed a new script each week, reported significant gains in reading rate and overall reading achievement (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999). Rasinski (1999) found that those who participated in Readers Theatre gained an average of 17 words per minute, the expected gain for an entire year. Students engaged in more traditional reading activities made less than half the gains of the Readers Theatre students (Rasinski, 1999).

Carrick (2006) used Readers Theatre with a fifth grade class and found that Readers Theatre improved reading rate and word accuracy. Young and Rasinski (2009) observed positive gains in word recognition, accuracy, reading rate, and prosody when Readers Theatre was used as part of a balanced literacy program throughout the course of the school year. As they explained, "(Readers Theatre) gave an opportunity for struggling readers to read fearlessly in the limelight" (p. 12). Rinehart (1999) found Readers Theatre to be an effective and motivating approach for students experiencing difficulties in reading. Clearly, Readers Theater can have a positive impact on reading development.

Implementing Readers Theatre

Finding a text that is appropriate for the reader is paramount to nurturing fluency. It is imperative that students have texts that are well within their easy or slightly challenging range (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998; Rasinski, 2004). This means that the students only make 5-6 errors every 100 words. Readers Theatre seems well-suited for the abilities and needs of struggling readers because it provides an appropriate text along with an authentic rationale for the repeated reading of that text. In Readers Theatre, students perform a story while reading directly from a script without relying on costumes, props, movement, or scenery to express meaning. These "productions" afford students the opportunity to select, rehearse, and present short skits to audiences without the pressure of memorizing lines. The performer's goal is to read the script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action (Rasinski, 2000; Rasinski & Padak, 1994; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Readers Theater scripts can be found on the Internet, in many professional catalogs, and even in basal readers. Readers Theatre scripts can be found at www.readinga-z.com, www.aaronshp.com/rt, www.readinglady.com, <http://www.readerstheatre.ecsd.net/collection.htm>, and www.timrasinski.com. Books of commercial scripts, many of which contain various text levels, can be purchased from publishers.

Readers Theatre appeals to students for a number of reasons: Readers Theatre is implemented in a cooperative format with peers, so that individual students don't

feel isolated as they read aloud. Scripts don't appear as daunting as other reading materials because the student does not have to read the entire text alone. Parts for which each student is responsible are intermingled with parts for which other students are responsible, affording students frequent breaks in oral reading. Roles varying in length allow children to select or be assigned to roles that suit their reading levels (Tyler & Chard, 2000). Finally, Readers Theatre provides reluctant readers with an authentic reason to reread the same text (Rasinski, 2000; Tyler & Chard, 2000). When readers embed appropriate phrasing, tone, emphasis, and volume in their oral reading, their interpretation of the selection is evident.

Finally, conducting Readers Theatre for struggling readers is not accomplished in a two day setting; rather it takes several days to provide enough practice so that students feel comfortable performing in front of others. The following example describes a study undertaken by one third grade teacher who investigated the degree to which Readers Theatre could help to improve the fluency and comprehension of her struggling third grade readers. The example below describes the fluency needs of the students in her class, the framework and timeframe she used to implementing Readers Theatre into the language arts block, and the findings of her investigation of Readers Theatre.

Implementing Readers Theatre with Struggling Third-Graders

While the research-base of Readers Theatre sounds promising in theory, teachers understandably respond with a skeptical, "Yes, but will it work in *my* classroom?" Such was the case for the teacher who conducted this study in her own classroom to investigate the impact of Readers Theatre on the fluency development of her struggling readers. The site for this study was a third grade classroom in a large urban elementary school, within a large city in the South. Participants for this study were 19 third-grade students who ages ranged from seven to nine. This-high poverty school was labeled "Equity-Plus" having more than 85% of its population on the free or reduced lunch program. Seventeen students in the targeted class fell into this category, meaning that the majority of the participants were from low income families. All of the students—nine girls and ten boys—were African American. Thirteen of them were from single-parent homes and resided in one of the most impoverished areas of the city. Many of the parents of the children had little spare time to devote to their children's educational needs. Two children were being raised by extended family members. Only two children had parents whose educational backgrounds went beyond high school. Three students were repeating third grade. Three students received special services four days weekly due to learning disabilities, one of which

included serious vision difficulties. None of the children in this class were on grade level when the study began.

The pretest scores of the participants on the third-grade Johns Basic Reading Inventory (2004) ranged from a high of 81 to a low of 9 WCPM, with a class average of 55 WCPM (The district's goal suggested that all second graders will read 90 WCPM by the end of the year). In addition, the students' prosody measure on the same third-grade passage ranged from 4-7 out of a possible 16 points, with a class average of 5 on Rasinski's Multidimensional Fluency Scale (2005). The students scored an average of 49% on measures of comprehension associated with the same passage. In summary, prior to the Readers Theatre intervention, all the students in this third grade class were struggling in all aspects of fluency.

After the pretest was administered, each student participated in six interventions using Readers Theatre materials and activities. Using the pretest data, the STAR Reading Test and the districts quarterly reading assessment, the classroom teacher chose six Readers Theatre scripts that were at the students' challenging instructional level and which had previously been developed and published. The program and scripts were read daily during the first 30 minutes of the two-hour literacy block. The program was administered as outlined by Authors (2005) which provides for repeatedly reading each new script.

A Weekly Cycle

Day 1 - Shared Reading: In a whole class setting the story was introduced. Background knowledge was activated and developed during this initial reading. New and important vocabulary was also introduced. There were discussions about genre and other literary concepts and skills relevant to current course of study and district curriculum guidelines. The teacher modeled expressive reading in order to demonstrate what accuracy, automaticity, and prosody should sound like. Next, the shared reading approach was used where students followed along in their text as the teacher read the story out loud to model automaticity and prosody. This provided a model in order to demonstrate how fluent reading sounds when reading the selected script. At the completion of the initial shared reading there was discussion again about the script's meaning or theme. After this initial read students were allowed to read the script several different ways including: chorally, with partners, and independently. To provide additional practice the text was sent home each day so that students could rehearse their scripts at home with a guardian.

Day 2 - Echo Reading: Still utilizing a whole class setting the teacher read a portion of the selected text aloud and then the students read the same section back

to the teacher chorally. This process continued until the entire text was completed. Echo reading provided a time to practice right after hearing an adult, like the teacher, read the section fluently. This instructional technique required the students to read the entire section once again before focusing on their selected/assigned parts.

Day 3 - Paired/Partner Reading: At this point in the lesson students were divided into pairs and took turns reading alternating sections of the script until the entire text was read. Afterwards, students reread the text reading the opposite sections that were read during the first reading. Once again, this emphasized the reading of the entire text. Buddy reading or partner reading is an excellent way to provide additional practice while reading with another person. The partners were encouraged to provide positive feedback to one another regarding the reader's fluency efforts. Once the entire script had been read by each of the reading partners the students could now begin rehearsing different parts in the script.

Day 4 - Choral/Expressive Reading: During this phase students participated in another whole class choral reading of the text. It was read a second time with each student focusing on assigned parts. Choral reading again provided practice and motivation for another reading as students read together as a class and then took on their selected parts. After the whole class activities the teacher placed the students in small guided reading groups where they could continue to practice their selected/assigned parts and make final decisions about how they wanted to present the script to the class.

Day 5 - Performance: After quickly reading through the selection one final time in their assigned parts and having a final discussion regarding aspects of the performance, the script was performed before another third grade class.

Results

Using this procedure, the teacher examined the impact of Readers Theatre on the oral reading fluency of struggling readers, as defined by word recognition accuracy, word recognition automaticity, and prosody. At the end of the six week intervention, pre-test results were compared to post-test results. Word recognition accuracy was measured by the number of words read correctly. Automaticity was measured by reading rate. Prosody was measured using the Multidimensional Fluency Scale, which uses a rubric to rate four aspects of prosody on a 4-point scale, with 1 indicating poor performance and 4 indicating good performance.

Word Recognition Accuracy

Post-test results indicate that students' word recognition accuracy, the number of words read correctly, improved dramatically. Seventeen WCPM is the approxi-

mate gain to be expected for an entire year (Rasinski, 1999). All of the participants scored above this benchmark. Twenty-one WCPM was the smallest increase of all the students that took part in the Readers Theatre experiences in this investigation. The highest increase, 64 WCPM, is 47 words above the predicted yearly gain - almost three times the expectancy. The class as a whole went from a class average of 55 WCPM to 93 WCPM. Words that had been practiced repeatedly during the Readers Theatre treatments were recognized and read accurately during the posttest. A decrease in reading errors is another benefit of repeated reading (NRP, 2000; Samuels, 1997). Every student, with the exception of one, had fewer miscues, indicating an increase in accuracy and a decrease in errors from pretest to posttest. During the pretest the class on average had 6.7 errors and on the posttest recorded an average of only 1.2 errors. Many of the miscues that students made during the initial assessment were nonexistent during the posttest.

Word Recognition Automaticity

LaBerge and Samuels (1974) stated that there should be as little mental effort as possible expended on decoding so that readers are able to use their finite cognitive resources for construction meaning. Outcomes indicate that, through the repeated readings inherent in preparation for Readers Theatre performances, reading rate increased for each participant. Words students were unable to identify in the pretest were read quickly and accurately during the posttest. Students were given one minute to read the pretest selection. After the six-week intervention, these students acquired automaticity that enabled them to read more words within the same allotment of time. Additionally, the teacher observed that students exhibited enthusiasm toward engaging in these activities.

Prosody

Prior to the intervention, students had difficulty in the area of prosody as reflected in their low pretest performance. Each child's combined score was less than 8 which, according to Rasinski (2004), shows severe weakness and is cause for concern. Students were likely experiencing problems that could affect their interpretation and understanding of text, as indicated in their class average of 49% on the comprehension measure. At the end of the six weeks, students read in expressive, rhythmic, and melodic patterns (Dowhower, 1991). According to the posttest Multidimensional Fluency Scale the class average increased from a score of 5 to an average of 11 on this measure. This indicates an increased understanding of meaningful phrasing and syntax and aids students in the understanding and interpretation of language (Rasinski, 2000). By listening to models of fluent reading, children were able to hear how the reader's voice made text make sense (Martinez, Roser, &

Strecker, 1999). Since the ultimate goal of this fluency intervention was to increase students understanding of text the post measure on comprehension also revealed encouraging results. As a whole the class comprehension went from an average of 49% to a class average of 86%. The class as a whole went from frustrational to almost independent in comprehension for a grade level passage in a 6 week period.

The outcomes indicate that reading through the use of Readers Theatre positively impacted the oral reading fluency and comprehension of struggling readers by significantly improving word recognition accuracy, word recognition automaticity, prosody and comprehension. In addition, observations of participant behavior during the intervention period suggest that Readers Theatre had a positive effect on every child's attitude toward reading. Many had previously responded negatively to reading assignments and displayed frustration during engagement in reading activities. Readers Theatre's cooperative format and authentic rereading the same text was highly motivational to these reluctant readers.

Conclusion

Readers Theatre provides teachers with a meaningful and purposeful context for incorporating repeated reading, even in the most challenging of learning contexts. Research recognizes the effectiveness of tested methods and practices that exist for the improvement of the oral fluency of struggling readers. Of these methods, repeated reading appears to be among the most successful (NRP, 2000). Readers Theater is one enjoyable way to authentically engage readers in repeated readings. Research has also overwhelmingly linked reading fluency to multiple measures of reading comprehension (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999). Oral reading fluency development through repeated readings has benefits that include: improving both fluency and comprehension; increasing speed and word recognition while decreasing word recognition errors (Samuels, 1997); increasing factual retention and encouraging deeper questioning and insights (Dowhower, 1989); and it is an excellent motivational device (Samuels, 1997). Oral reading fluency is a vital component for proficient reading. Performance activities, such as Readers Theatre, provide authentic reasons to read and reread selections focusing on fluency as well as text understanding, and interpretation.

Readers Theatre should be given teachers' highest consideration. Readers Theatre integrates many methods used to improve oral reading fluency such as modeling, echo reading, buddy reading, choral reading, and repeated reading. When teachers make fluency a major focus and provide instruction and materials that are engaging, students can accomplish the major goal of reading instruction - reading independ-

ently for learning and enjoyment (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001/2002). Research and practice indicate that the use of Readers Theatre has the potential to enhance both the fluency and the comprehension development of students, particularly those students who struggle to develop fluency and comprehension.



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About the Authors

Mary Ann Mraz is Associate Professor of Reading and Elementary Education and Doctoral Program Coordinator at North Carolina University at Charlotte

William Dee Nichols is Dean of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine

Safronia Caldwell is a classroom teacher with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Rene Beisley is a classroom teacher with the Bartlesville Public Schools in Oklahoma

Stephan E. Sargent is an Associate Professor in Curriculum and Instruction and Reading Chair at Northeastern State University

William Rupley is Professor and Distinguished Research Fellow at Texas A&M University