

Using Readers Theater to Show Off Good Reading

Janet Caluris

As teachers of reading, we begin the school year looking at our students' levels of reading achievement and making instructional decisions on which strategies will facilitate the development of good reading. In this age of accountability we teachers are also confronted with the fact that the creation of students that can produce great test scores on multiple choice tests seems to matter more to district administrations than the creation of students that can fluently read, critically think, and thoroughly discuss given texts with their peers. As teachers we are also faced with the added dilemma of trying to ensure that our students will continue to implement the chosen reading strategies on their own when teacher prompting is removed.

This year I found myself with many students who read in slow, inexpressive voices that demonstrated the unenthusiastic way that they approached the task of reading. Those students also tended to read less than their more able peers. I recognized that they were unlikely to make reading gains unless I could encourage them to read more on their own. So I set in place a plan to have my students read independently 15 minutes a day, knowing that by the end of the year they would have been exposed to more than one million words. I also decided to utilize readers theater to allow my students the opportunity to listen to great models of and engage in fluent reading. I hoped that through this demonstration of how good readers make sense out of what they are reading they would be motivated to improve their own reading abilities.

The questions my study addresses are:

How can I effectively utilize readers theater to improve the fluency and reading comprehension skills of my students?

- What does readers theater look like in my classroom?
- What is the impact of readers theater on my students' levels of fluency?
- What is the impact of readers theater on my students' levels of comprehension?
- What changes in students' level of interest in reading and reading behaviors are noted following the use of readers theater?

Rationale

Research reflects that rereading of texts and oral reading improves students' fluency and reading achievement. The National Reading Panel in 2000 identified fluency as a key ingredient to successful reading instruction due to its effect on students' reading efficiency and comprehension. Identifying the impact of readers theater on my students' fluency levels and comprehension is important because third grade is considered a benchmark grade in my district, and promotional criteria is based on reading at or above a designated reading percentile as measured by our annual standardized testing. Evaluating the impact of readers theater and noting the patterns I discover in my students' performance will help me effectively implement an instructional program to meet their individual needs. Since bridging the gap between actual and expected levels of achievement in reading comprehension is a common problem facing the majority of third grade teachers across our city, the findings of this study may be of benefit to assisting them in improving their students' reading comprehension.

Instructional Context

I teach third grade in a culturally diverse community that is predominantly composed of lower middle class incomes. My school is Pre-K to 8 with a population of over 900 students housed on four different sites due to overcrowding. 65% of my students qualify for free and reduced lunch due to their limited income. My thirty-five third graders (16 girls, 19 boys) range in age from eight to ten in our self contained classroom. Eight of my students are bilingual with limited English proficiency. They speak Urdu, Spanish, Tagalog (Filipino), Bulgarian and Greek as their first language. They have progressed to the point where they can speak and understand conversational English, but reading comprehension still poses a great deal of difficulty for them due to vocabulary demands and limited inferential skills.

Five of the children in my class have moderate to severe learning disabilities. These students have individual educational plans that specify they receive services in an inclusive setting, which requires the special education teacher to come into our classroom to assist in modifying and adapting the curriculum to best fit their educational needs for forty minutes a day. Due to scheduling conflicts for their other forty scheduled minutes, she must pull the students from their classroom and work with them in her resource room. Four of my children are on medication for ADHD. Three students work with the social worker on behavior issues. Two students are seen for expressive language and articulation difficulties by a speech therapist on a weekly basis. I also teach four gifted students who are functioning at a fifth grade level and must make accommodations to the curriculum to provide challenging activities for them. I work with a curriculum differentiation teacher and my two third grade team members to plan projects so we can present all the third graders in our school with an effective instructional reading program.

Theory and Research on Readers Theater

Fluency is consistently defined throughout research as the ability to read at a good pace, without errors and with expression. It serves to connect word recognition with comprehension. Research demonstrates that the more attention a reader has to give to accurately read words, the less attention they have left for comprehending the text (Foorman & Mehta, 2002; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

It is not known if good fluency leads to good comprehension or if good comprehension follows high fluency based on available research (Stecker, Roser and Martinez, 1998) only that a reciprocal relationship exists between the two elements. The 2000 National Reading Panel also found no convincing research that increasing sustained silent reading time for students would lead to increased fluency levels and to greater reading achievement.

Research also supports that a lack of fluency serves as an indicator that reading comprehension is a problem (Stanovich, 1991). "The simple fact that slow reading requires the readers to invest considerably greater amounts of time in the reading task than classmates who are reading at a rate appropriate for their grade level should be a major cause for concern for all teachers" (Rasinski, 2000). Students exhibiting slow reading rates have to work longer and harder to process the same text as their peers. The slower reading results in slower progress and higher levels of frustration with reading. In 1974 LaBerge and Samuels found through their research that slower readers use the majority of their cognitive resources for word recognition, resulting in limited resources for

comprehension processing. Other research demonstrated higher levels of comprehension with students who exhibited faster reading rates. (Pinnell, et al., 1995) (Rasinski, 2000). The 2000 National Panel supported the multiple reading of texts to lead to good fluency and taking multiple measures of fluency to gauge reading progress throughout the year. Research has shown that Readers theater can be utilized to assist students in reading words correctly and accurately with significant gains in fluency in the short term (Rinehart, 1999; Tyler & Chard, 2000). Research on long term results is still unavailable. The repeated reading required in readers theater provides students with practice to move decoding to an automatic level. (Samuels, 2002).

Readers theater is defined as a rehearsed group oral presentation of a script. The emphasis of the presentation is on how the students read their lines. It is meant to be an engaging means of motivating the students to improve their fluency and enhance their comprehension through multiple rereadings of texts. The goal of readers theater is to build the students' confidence and skill through those repeated readings, enhancing comprehension.

Hudson, Lane & Pullen (2005) found that fluency based instruction is essential for struggling readers. Rinehart (1999) and Tyler & Chard (2000) found that readers theater, a fluency based strategy, enhanced both oral reading skills and lead to better comprehension. The teamwork involved in the presentation also serves to motivate the students to engage in more attentive reading. Second language learners benefit through the repeated practice of hearing the reading sound like conversational language; subsequently they may be able to make more sense of the text.

Motivation has been found to influence the level of persistence with which the students engage with the selection. (Pardo, 2004). Because of the manner in which repeated readings are presented in readers theater, students are motivated to work harder to build meaning.

Assessment Tools

To begin my twelve week study I decided to gather baseline data on my students' attitudes towards reading using a brief true / false survey. The survey was constructed of selected items from a district provided assessment tool. I administered the survey because I know how important a positive attitude and good reading habits are in facilitating skill development in my students, so I felt knowledge of this information was key if I wanted to effect a change in my students reading skills. The two surveys were administered in a whole group session with me reading the material aloud and explaining the statements as needed so that the bilingual and special needs students would have full access to the material.

Since my classroom is very diverse I decided to break down the data into four separate groups:

- Academically talented – four children who have been tested by my district's gifted office and found to have superior academic skills.
- General Education – eighteen children in the education mainstream
- Bilingual – eight children who have limited English skills and receive resource services through the bilingual program.
- Special Needs – five students who have undergone a full case study in which learning disabilities were identified and special services determined to be necessary.

By breaking the data down I felt I would be able to note if the strategy of readers theater affected a difference in one group more than another so I could provide effective instruction.

Following is a chart of the baseline data I collected on my students' attitude about reading:

Total Class (35 children)	True
1. I love to read.	77%
2. I like reading aloud.	34%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	77%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	77%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	46%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	69%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	54%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	54%

Academically Talented (4 students)	True
1. I love to read.	75%
2. I like reading aloud.	25%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	100%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	50%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	0%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	50%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	50%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	50%

General Education (18 students)	True
1. I love to read.	78%
2. I like reading aloud.	44%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	72%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	83%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	38%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	67%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	38%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	44%

Bilingual (8 students)	True
1. I love to read.	88%
2. I like reading aloud.	12%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	88%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	75%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	75%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	88%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	75%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	75%

Special Needs (5 students)	True
1. I love to read.	60%
2. I like reading aloud.	40%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	60%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	60%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	60%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	60%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	80%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	60%

I also administered a comprehension checklist to gather baseline data of the strategies my students never, sometimes or always used in the reading process. The following is a chart of that data:

Summary of baseline data on Student Responses to a Student Comprehension Checklist

Total Class (35 students)	Never	Sometimes	Always
focus on ideas, not just words.	30%	44%	26%
go back and reread.	26%	34%	40%
relate the story to what I already know.	23%	54%	23%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	31%	43%	26%
retell the story in my own words.	40%	43%	17%
talk about the book with a friend.	32%	51%	17%

Academically Talented (4 students)	Never	Sometimes	Always
focus on ideas, not just words.	25%	25%	50%
go back and reread.	50%	50%	0%
relate the story to what I already know.	50%	25%	25%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	75%	25%	0%
retell the story in my own words.	50%	50%	0%
talk about the book with a friend.	75%	25%	0%

General Education (18 students)	Never	Sometimes	Always
focus on ideas, not just words.	29%	47%	24%
go back and reread.	22%	28%	50%
relate the story to what I already know.	17%	72%	11%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	22%	50%	28%
retell the story in my own words.	28%	50%	22%
talk about the book with a friend.	28%	50%	22%

Bilingual (8 students)	Never	Sometimes	Always
focus on ideas, not just words.	25%	37%	37%
go back and reread.	25%	25%	50%
relate the story to what I already know.	13%	62%	25%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	37%	50%	13%
retell the story in my own words.	62%	38%	0%
talk about the book with a friend.	13%	62%	25%

Special Needs (4 students)	Never	Sometimes	Always
focus on ideas, not just words.	40%	60%	0%
go back and reread.	20%	60%	20%
relate the story to what I already know.	40%	0%	60%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	20%	20%	60%
retell the story in my own words.	40%	0%	60%
talk about the book with a friend.	40%	40%	20%

Since Readers theater is a fluency strategy, I also gathered baseline data on my students' reading rate- automaticity, word recognition accuracy and prosodic reading.

Reading rate is a measure of how the reader automatically decodes words, leaving remaining cognitive resources free to comprehend the text. It is determined by counting the number of words a student accurately reads orally in one minute. The score is then compared to the current rate and fluency guidelines. For grade three the target reading rate is 86 to 124 words per minute. I utilized the third grade level passages of an informal reading inventory because it provided me with four forms of test passages. Therefore I would be able to assess students' progress at three week intervals during my study. Each assessment was administered on a one to one basis.

The baseline data I gathered was:

Reading Rates	Total class	Academically Talented	General Education	Bilingual	Special Needs
Below expected levels	37%	0%	22%	50%	100%
At expected levels	34%	0%	50%	38%	0%
Above expected levels	29%	100%	28%	12%	0%

Word recognition was determined by calculating the percentage of words the student decoded and read accurately during the one minute period. I then divided the number of words read accurately by the total number of words read. A percentage of 92 to 98 percent is normally demonstrated at an instructional reading level. An independent reading level normally is reflected with a 99 to 100 percent accuracy word recognition level.

Baseline Levels of Word Recognition:

	Initial
Total Class	97%
• Special Needs	96%
• Bilingual	97%
• General Education	97%
• Academically Talented	100%

Finally, I looked at the prosodic reading of my students – the ability to read with expression demonstrating the meaning they were gathering from the text. I assessed their expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness and pace utilizing a fluency scale I adapted from a scale developed by Rasinski. (1991)

The scale was as follows:

Dimension	1	2	3
Expression and volume	Little expression, Quiet voice	Some expression, appropriate voice	Good expression, appropriate voice
Phrasing	monotone	Some choppiness	Reads moderately
Smoothness	Pauses, repeats	Occasional breaks	Generally smooth
Pace	Slow	Varied	Consistently conversational

Assessing the students’ prosody provided me with an understanding of how they were trying to make sense of the text since their use of expression served to indicate their construction of meaning of the passages.

The following is a chart of my results of baseline data:

Dimension	Total class	Academically Talented	General Education	Bilingual	Special Needs
Expression and Volume	1.6	3	1.3	1.5	1.4
Phrasing	1.8	3	1.7	1.75	1.4
Smoothness	1.7	3	1.7	1.25	1.4
Pace	2.1	3	2.2	1.5	2

I also assessed the students’ understanding of what they had read by asking five questions following the completion of their oral reading of the passage. The questions involved recalling detail, identifying the main idea, making an inference, recalling the sequence and using the context. My results were as follows:

Baseline Levels of Comprehension:

	Initial
Total Class	84%
• Special Needs	72%
• Bilingual	86%
• General Education	86%
• Academically Talented	90%

The Study – Data

In my classroom Readers theater was accomplished in groups of 5 - 6 students arranged in mixed ability groups. The scripts I selected came from grade appropriate multicultural folktale plays (to teach conflict resolution), fractured fairy tales, fables and finally picture or chapter books. The students were allowed to choose the play they wanted to perform.

I first introduced readers theater by modeling expressive reading to the students as I read aloud each character’s part. I wanted the students to listen to the expression and phrasing I used to make the characters “come alive”. I then introduced a readers theater script. Initially all groups were given the same script so that students could hear their lines delivered in a variety of ways by their peers, since research has supported listening to fluent readers as a powerful strategy to improve fluency and comprehension. The scripts were distributed each Monday with each student’s part highlighted. After listening to my reading of the script, we then choral read the parts for practice. Then the students were told to rehearse their lines nightly for the next three days with a parent or older sibling. On Friday the students performed their scripts for the class. Following all the final performances was a discussion of the text so I could assess their comprehension of the material. I allowed the students to form their own groups, though I made sure each group was composed of mixed ability levels. I also let the students determine who would have what role. I encouraged the students to solve disputes fairly but I stepped in as needed.

The first four scripts were all fractured fairy tales since we were involved in a fairy tale unit at the time. After four weeks I administered form B of the informal reading inventory and was disappointed with the results. Typical growth in fluency – reading rate is one word per week. However, only 13 of my 35 students had shown that growth. My results were as follows:

Reading Rates	Total class		Academically Talented		General Education		Bilingual		Special Needs	
	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post
Below expected levels	37%	43%	0%	0%	22%	44%	50%	50%	100%	60%
At expected levels	34%	34%	0%	0%	50%	39%	38%	38%	0%	40%
Above expected levels	29%	23%	100%	100%	28%	17%	12%	12%	0%	0%

There was no change in data for either the academically talented or the bilingual groups of students. There was improvement in 2 of the special needs students. This may be due to the fact that they were hearing the words and following along as I originally read their lines and then practicing immediately after in school during the choral read. Both of the students who showed progress had good auditory memories. The group that showed a decline in fluency was the general education students. I was observing a similar lack of improvement in the other two dimensions of fluency; word recognition and prosody with this group also. After conversations with the students I found they were not rereading the scripts at home as I had instructed them to do. The reasons I was given for not rereading the script included: “there was no one home to read it to, so I couldn’t practice”, “I keep forgetting my script at school”, “I thought you’d be mad if I left it at home so I kept it at school” or “I know my lines already, I don’t have to reread it”. I then asked my students how they felt about rereading texts and 95% of all my students shared that they did not like doing it or saw no purpose for it. I then revised my initial plan. I knew I had to motivate them to see the value in repeated readings if I wanted to be successful. I also wanted them to take more ownership of the assessment process.

First, I built in daily classroom time for the students to read their scripts in their groups. I circulated among the groups providing feedback on their reading of their lines and encouraging the students to do the same with their peers. On Friday when the students presented their plays, I distributed a form for the students in the audience to judge the play performance.

The form was as follows:

- Rating scale 1. never 2. sometimes 3. most of the time 4. always
1. Were their voices loud enough to be heard?
 2. Did their voices show expression?
 3. Did they sound like they were carrying on a conversation?
 4. Did they show creativity such as using body language?

The groups continued to be fluid and changed weekly as students selected the play they wanted to perform from the grade appropriate choices I gave them. I continued to make sure the groups were formed of mixed ability levels and that students continued to have roles that would challenge them. Each Friday the plays were presented by the groups and videotaped by me. The class watched the tape to complete their rating forms. I felt having the students watch their performance would provide valuable personal feedback on their fluency. The students had no difficulty responding to our discussion questions. At times students even referred to character’s lines to support the

statement they had made. At the end of the eighth and twelfth week I administered the informal reading inventory forms c and d to note progress.

The results were as follows:

Reading Rates	Total Class – 35 students	Initial	Stage 2	Stage 3	Final
Below expected levels		37%	43%	31%	17%
At expected levels		34%	34%	32%	34%
Above expected levels		29%	23%	37%	49%

Reading Rates	Academically Talented - 4 Students	Initial	Stage 2	Stage 3	Final
Below expected levels		0%	0%	0%	0%
At expected levels		0%	0%	0%	0%
Above expected levels		100%	100%	100%	100%

Reading Rates	General Education - 18 students	Initial	Stage 2	Stage 3	Final
Below expected levels		22%	44%	28%	11%
At expected levels		50%	39%	33%	33%
Above expected levels		28%	17%	39%	56%

Reading Rates	Bilingual - 8 students	Initial	Stage 2	Stage 3	Final
Below expected levels		50%	50%	50%	38%
At expected levels		38%	38%	38%	50%
Above expected levels		12%	12%	12%	12%

Reading Rates	Special Needs - 5 students	Initial	Stage 2	Stage 3	Final
Below expected levels		100%	60%	40%	20%
At expected levels		0%	40%	40%	40%
Above expected levels		0%	0%	20%	40%

The special needs students showed significant gains in reading rates. Initially all the students were reading below expected levels. At the end of the study, only one student was still below expected levels but that student had gained a rate of 28 words per minute. Since the expected normal rate of growth is twelve words, he had made more than double that level of progress. All the other students had moved to at or above expected levels.

The bilingual group as a whole showed little change. Of this group of eight students only three showed significant progress with average growth of more than twenty words per minute. These students were also level three, designating them as near the end of their bilingual placement. The students who had only been in this country for one to two years demonstrated the smallest gains in fluency.

Some general education students also showed significant gains in reading rate. Seven students made twice or greater the expected levels of growth. Six students made average gains and five showed less than average growth. Those that did not show expected growth were also the students frequently demonstrating inappropriate behavior in the classroom. Since all the academically

talented students were already reading at rates above the expected norms there was no change in this area for this group.

An analysis of the levels of word recognition between the baseline data and at the end of the study is as follows:

	Initial	Final
Total Class	97%	99%
• Special Needs	96%	98%
• Bilingual	97%	99%
• General Education	97%	99%
• Academically Talented	100%	100%

The special needs, general education and bilingual groups each showed gains of two percent. All groups were now able to read the third grade texts with little difficulty in decoding the words.

Results on the fluency scale were as follows:

Dimension	Total class		Academically Talented		General Education		Bilingual		Special Needs	
	initial	final	initial	final	initial	final	initial	final	initial	final
Expression and Volume	1.6	2.6	3	3	1.3	2.7	1.5	2.6	1.4	2.4
Phrasing	1.8	2.8	3	3	1.7	2.8	1.75	2.8	1.4	2.4
Smoothness	1.7	2.7	3	3	1.7	2.9	1.25	2.6	1.4	2.2
Pace	2.1	2.8	3	3	2.2	2.9	1.5	2.8	2	2.6

The special needs, bilingual and general education groups showed gains of about one point in all areas. The bilingual students especially improved in the smoothness and pace of their reading as they moved from making frequent extended pauses and multiple attempts at reading the text to only making occasional breaks in their reading rhythm when attempting to read unknown words that were difficult for them to decode. The general education students showed the greatest gains in reading with appropriate expression and using a voice level that was loud enough for the audience to hear. As my students' self confidence levels grew they demonstrated better oral delivery of what they read. They were no longer just reading lines off a page but enthusiastically performing their lines using their voice to demonstrate understanding of their character. This was a skill that previous to this point only the academically talented group had demonstrated.

Levels of Comprehension:

	Initial	Final
Total Class	84%	92%
• Special Needs	72%	80%
• Bilingual	86%	91%
• General Education	86%	94%
• Academically Talented	90%	100%

In comprehension all groups showed gains. Students demonstrated greater ability in identifying the

main idea, recalling details and the sequence of events. Using contextual clues to determine word meaning and make inferences still presented areas of difficulty for some of the students.

The results of the follow up students' attitude survey on reading were as follows:

Total Class (35 students)	Pre	Post
1. I love to read.	77%	80%
2. I like reading aloud.	34%	63%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	77%	86%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	77%	83%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	46%	17%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	69%	77%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	54%	77%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	54%	43%

Academically Talented (4 students)	Pre	Post
1. I love to read.	75%	100%
2. I like reading aloud.	25%	25%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	100%	100%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	50%	100%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	0%	75%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	50%	50%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	50%	75%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	50%	50%

General Education (18 students)	Pre	Post
1. I love to read.	78%	89%
2. I like reading aloud.	44%	74%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	72%	83%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	83%	83%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	38%	6%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	67%	89%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	38%	74%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	44%	33%

Bilingual (8 students)	Pre	Post
1. I love to read.	88%	63%
2. I like reading aloud.	12%	50%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	88%	75%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	75%	87%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	75%	25%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	88%	63%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	75%	87%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	75%	50%

Special Needs (5 students)	Pre	Post
1. I love to read.	60%	60%
2. I like reading aloud.	40%	80%
3. I like reading quietly to myself.	60%	100%
4. Sometimes I can't answer questions because I can't remember everything about it.	60%	60%
5. When I come to a word I don't know I just skip it.	60%	20%
6. I like reading aloud because I'm proud of how well I read.	60%	80%
7. I prefer reading in a group with children who read at the same speed as I do.	80%	80%
8. I like telling my classmates about a book I enjoyed reading.	60%	60%

Overall about 30 percent of my students changed their opinions about liking to read aloud and now preferred it. The general education students showed the greatest gain in number of students who loved to read. A negative or no effect was noted with the bilingual and special needs populations.

About thirty percent of my students now reported not skipping words when they do not know them when reading. The special needs, bilingual and general education groups all demonstrated significant decreases. The academically talented group, however, showed a shift with three out of the four students now stating they skipped words they did not know. The reason for this appears to be that as I challenge that group with instructional material at a higher level, they are now faced with words they are not familiar with. Since they are used to reading at a fast pace they tend to skip over those words because they still feel they can understand the main concepts of the text even without knowledge of those words. The results do show that as material is presented at a high instructional level, students will demonstrate negative reading behaviors and that this is an area a teacher must carefully monitor.

About 20 percent of the class now reported liking working with heterogeneous groups more, probably as a result of the peer review process with the greatest gains being noted with the general education group.

Summary of Student Responses on Student Comprehension Checklist

Total Class (35 students)	Never Pre	Post	Sometimes Pre	Post	Always Pre	Post
focus on ideas, not just words.	30%	6%	44%	65%	26%	29%
go back and reread.	26%	0%	34%	54%	40%	46%
relate the story to what I already know.	23%	11%	54%	58%	23%	31%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	31%	20%	43%	37%	26%	43%
retell the story in my own words.	40%	37%	43%	49%	17%	14%
talk about the book with a friend.	32%	17%	51%	72%	17%	11%

Academically Talented (4 students)	Never Pre	Post	Sometimes Pre	Post	Always Pre	Post
focus on ideas, not just words.	25%	0%	25%	50%	50%	50%
go back and reread.	50%	0%	50%	25%	0%	75%
relate the story to what I already know.	50%	0%	25%	50%	25%	50%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	75%	25%	25%	0%	0%	75%
retell the story in my own words.	50%	25%	50%	50%	0%	25%
talk about the book with a friend.	75%	0%	25%	100%	0%	0%

General Education (18 students)	Never Pre	Post	Sometimes Pre	Post	Always Pre	Post
focus on ideas, not just words.	29%	0%	47%	78%	24%	22%
go back and reread.	22%	0%	28%	50%	50%	50%
relate the story to what I already know.	17%	6%	72%	61%	11%	33%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	22%	22%	50%	39%	28%	39%
retell the story in my own words.	28%	28%	50%	50%	22%	22%
talk about the book with a friend.	28%	28%	50%	50%	22%	22%

Bilingual (8 students)	Never		Sometimes		Always	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
focus on ideas, not just words.	25%	13%	37%	62%	37%	25%
go back and reread.	25%	0%	25%	87%	50%	13%
relate the story to what I already know.	13%	25%	62%	62%	25%	13%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	37%	25%	50%	50%	13%	25%
retell the story in my own words.	62%	62%	38%	38%	0%	0%
talk about the book with a friend.	13%	0%	62%	100%	25%	0%

Special Needs (5 students)	Never		Sometimes		Always	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
focus on ideas, not just words.	40%	20%	60%	40%	0%	40%
go back and reread.	20%	0%	60%	40%	20%	60%
relate the story to what I already know.	40%	20%	0%	40%	60%	40%
ask myself if I understand what I'm reading.	20%	20%	20%	20%	60%	60%
retell the story in my own words.	40%	60%	0%	20%	60%	20%
talk about the book with a friend.	40%	20%	40%	60%	20%	20%

More students reported that they now focused on comprehension of the text instead of simply decoding words. The students had seen the value of rereading texts and were applying it across the curriculum. The number of students who engaged in think-alouds as they read nearly doubled as they thought about what they read. There was little change in the statistics regarding retelling of the story in the students' own words, possibly because my students prefer to work on other projects chosen based on their multiple intelligences to demonstrate understanding of the text rather than straight verbal recall. More students stated they sometimes talked about books with their friends, and I noticed more peer assistance in helping to select books from our classroom library.

The academically talented group improved their reading habits by increasingly engaging in rereading texts and asking themselves if they understood the text. The general education students seemed to make the greatest move from never to sometimes applying the comprehension skills being measured. This group especially showed gains in the area of focusing on the idea of the text rather than just the simple words. Bilingual students improved in that area as well, but also demonstrated a tendency to reread the text for greater understanding. The special needs group showed improvement in focusing on the ideas of the text and rereading the text for understanding, as well as making personal connections to the text. Retelling the story in their words moved from a more positive approach to the negative. When questioned later by me, the students explained their answer choice that "show what I know through a project is easier" and preferable.

Student comments at the end of the study about how they liked readers theater included:

"Going over the lines helps you know the words and it helps me understand what the story is about"

"You need to remember your fluency, pause at the right lines and know all the words to be good at readers theater"

"It makes you remember to read with excitement and read more carefully. It's enjoyable"

“Readers theater helped me learn to take turns and read a lot better. You got to not goof around and not just look around the room when someone else is reading”

Analysis

The results of my project affirmed that utilizing readers theater does lead to improved levels of fluency and reading comprehension. However, while all my students benefited, my results did not show equal gains for all students. Those who “bought in” to this fluency strategy by engaging in rereading of the scripts improved the most. Readers theater allowed all my students to benefit from the repeated readings through performing their scripts with confidence, fluency, and expression before their peers. As the students became more fluent, they could utilize their cognitive resources for comprehension. Video taping the performances and allowing them to watch and assess themselves gave them clear feedback as to their strengths and needs.

My study also confirmed that I needed to present the strategy in a manner the students would utilize independently. Left alone, my students did not engage in rereading until they saw the benefit of doing so. My initial modeling of the lines followed by peer modeling through choral reading facilitated my struggling readers’ use of applying expression to their own reading. The students who experienced a change in attitude towards reading likewise showed the greatest gains in fluency but it is not clear if the attitude changed as a result of improved performance or vice versa, since the attitude survey was only administered at the start and end of the study. I also found that students who had previously never raised their hands to read orally in class were now asking to be the character that had the greatest number of lines.

I broke the data down into the four major groups - academically talented, general education, bilingual and special needs - represented in my classroom to see if readers theater worked best for any one group. The academically talented group showed no gain because they were already fluent readers with great comprehension. I saw roughly the same percentage of gains in word recognition for the remaining groups. Overall comprehension was greater for the general education and special needs students than the bilingual students possibly because although those students were more fluent, they still needed to develop their understanding of the vocabulary to improve comprehension.

Research demonstrates that a lack of fluency is an indicator of comprehension problems and that focusing instructional efforts on fluency has led to improved attitudes toward reading and ultimately to greater comprehension. Readers theater improved my students’ reading rate, word recognition accuracy and use of expression while reading, as well as their attitude. As they thought they were better readers they demonstrated greater fluency and comprehension. Assessment was critical to my discovery of how to make readers theater a successful experience for my students. I was not aware of the extent of the off task behaviors my students engaged in when left to read independently. Readers theater eliminated the use of most of those behaviors. A limitation of my study is that there is no data if readers theater will continue to serve as a motivational tool to improve fluency and the use of on task behaviors over time. There is no data on the long term effects of readers theater on fluency and comprehension and how it continues to effect independent reading activities.

Policy Recommendations

At the school level, teachers of struggling students need to recognize that readers theater provides their children with an enjoyable opportunity to engage in rereading texts. Thus they benefit both from the multiple interactions with the text and with their peers, resulting in improved fluency and comprehension levels.

Incorporating fluency instruction is integral to the creation of an effective comprehension program because if fluency is not developed, the act of decoding drains some of the students' available resources from constructing meaning of the text resulting in lower comprehension.

Readers theater serves as a great motivational tool that teachers should utilize to give reluctant students greater self confidence in their reading and ultimately improve their reading attitudes, habits and performance levels. Radio reading, a variation of readers theater, can be easily incorporated at the middle school level with the older students adding sound effects to enhance their performance.

Readers theater scripts can easily be created either by the teacher or the students to review concepts from any curriculum materials, providing the students with multiple interactions with the subject matter promoting greater retention and understanding.

At the district level, administrators need to encourage teachers to incorporate motivational reading activities into the curriculum instead of having time spent on test prep materials. Research supports that students do better if they feel more confident in themselves as readers and engage in independent reading more often which readers theater accomplishes.

Fluency assessments that measure reading rate, word recognition accuracy and fluency through expression needs to be administered at quarterly intervals. Built into the reading program, they will help teachers identify where their students are and where they need to improve. Since fluency is an essential skill that all good readers demonstrate, it is important that teachers be encouraged to address its development and assessment in their lesson plans.

My review of the available research showed that as teachers became familiar with readers theater and applied a version of it in their classrooms, all reported great gains in fluency and a positive change in their students' attitude toward reading. Administrators should note that teachers need the opportunity to share what is working in their classrooms so colleagues can make informed decisions and incorporate great ideas in their programs. If administrators want to see improved student performance in their schools they should let knowledgeable teachers pave the way.

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