

A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF READERS' THEATER ON SECOND AND THIRD GRADE SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS' FLUENCY GROWTH

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The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of a readers' theater fluency program. The participants were 12 students with learning disabilities in a combined second/ third grade exceptional education classroom. Through the use of pre and post reading attitude surveys, field notes recorded by the observer, and pre and post oral fluency running records it was determined that readers' theater is effective in improving student interest in reading, confidence in reading, and overall fluency in number of words read correctly per minute. Implications are that fluency programs are beneficial in primary grades and provide the foundation necessary for student attainment of vocabulary and comprehension skills.

How do we help children learn to read at a normal pace and understand what's being read? How can we help children read with expression and intonation? This article summarizes a readers' theater program that was effective in improving student interest in reading, confidence in reading, and overall fluency in number of words read correctly per minute.

Need for Fluency

Fluency is the ability to read a text with speed and accuracy, recognizing each word effortlessly and beginning to construct meaning from each word and group of words as they are read. Without the attainment of fluency there is an inability to master vocabulary and a gap in the ability to focus to comprehend texts (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003).

Most children develop into fluent readers by third grade (Martinez, Roser, & Stricker, 1999). Approximately 75 percent of students who are poor readers in third grade continue to be lower achieving readers in ninth grade and, in essence, do not recover their reading abilities even into adulthood. Thus the assessment of student progress in fluency has become an integral part of reading instruction (Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000).

Fluency is measured by giving the student a passage of text, written on grade level, that has not been read by him or her prior to this assessment. The student is timed for one minute and reads out loud as much of the passage as he or she can in that time. In the end the observer, usually a teacher or reading specialist, calculates the number of words correctly pronounced and identifies the reading rate. This is done by

taking the total number of words that were read correctly and dividing them by the number of words in the passage. These scores are then recorded and compared to a national average for that specific grade level, giving a quartile range for where that student stands in comparison. School systems attempt to assess student fluency rates on an average of three times a year; usually in the fall, winter, and spring (Matinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999; Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Rasinski, 2000).

Assessing the fluency level of a reader is critical, but so is the availability of programs that include modeling oral fluency as well as guided and independent practice. Unfortunately, research suggests that such programs are rarely found in classrooms. When included in the curriculum, one of the most commonly used strategies for improving reading fluency is the method of repeated readings; through this strategy students practice rereading a text on their reading level at least three times. This method has been shown to be very effective as it improves word recognition, speed, accuracy, and comprehension (Worthy, & Broaddus, 2001; Homan, Klesius, & Hite, 1993; Samuels, 1997). However in some instances this method may not increase student motivation and interest in reading. With this in mind, an oral fluency strategy is most effective when it incorporates the use of modeling, repeated readings, independent practice, and motivates student interest in reading (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002; Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Rinehart, 1999).

Readers' Theater as a Fluency Strategy

Readers' theater is an example of a strategy that uses several instructional forms shown to improve fluency, including repeated readings. Through this method student interest and motivation to read is also positively reinforced (Rinehart, 1999; Carrick, 2001). Readers' theater uses guidance, modeling, and independent student practice, while students rehearse a play, speech, poem, or other appropriate text. They rehearse until they are able to perform it fluently and with expression for an audience. This is different from other forms of theater because the students are not expected to memorize or completely act out a reading; instead the focus is on fluently conveying meaning through expression and intonation (Worthy & Prater, 2002; Shepard, 1994; Wolf, 1993). Students' attitudes, confidence, oral fluency, and sight word recognition improve when readers' theater and repeated readings are used with low-achieving students (Rinehart, 1999).

Readers' theater benefits resistant readers when they are given speaking parts of varying length based on their comfort level in an environment that is conducive to risk taking (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). This oral fluency strategy permits students, who are rarely given the opportunity to read aloud in dramatic performances, a chance to read, practice, and successfully perform. Worthy and Broaddus recommended that students be allowed to determine when they feel ready to perform. With the students determining when they feel confident, there is a dramatic increase in their success rate of reading aloud. This causes a noticeable rise in student self-confidence, oral fluency, and motivation

to read out loud (Worthy & Prater, 2002; Worthy & Broadus, 2001).

Methodology

This study was a measure of the attitudinal impact of a readers' theater program designed to address the oral fluency needs of second and third grade students diagnosed with learning disabilities. It was also intended to measure the confidence in reading and overall fluency in number of words read correctly per minute. The purpose of this program was to provide the low achieving students' with opportunities to practice and then perform a readers' theater script to a group of pre-kindergarten children.

The Elementary Reading Attitudes Survey (Mc Kenna & Kear, 1990) was referenced to adapt a survey that measures the attitude of the second and third grade students before the readers' theatre program was implemented and again eight weeks later. Pre and post fluency scores were collected within the same time frame as the survey, and field notes were recorded to help note student comments and observations occurring in the classroom.

Participants

Participants in this study were 12 students in a self-contained combination second and third grade, Learning Disabled and Emotionally Handicapped classroom. The classroom is in a public school in a Central Florida town with a population of approximately 20,000. Of the participants, three were females and nine were males. Ethnically the class consisted of one African American, one Hispanic, one Pacific Islander, and nine Caucasian. Four out

of the twelve students received speech services twice a week. Three were considered Emotionally Handicapped, one student was diagnosed as having Aspergers Syndrome, and eight were classified as Learning Disabled with a few of those eight being classified as having Attention Deficit Disorder. One student had severe vision and hearing disabilities requiring specialized equipment such as a microphone worn by the teacher that was received in a headset worn by the student. This class was taught by a reading recovery trained first year exceptional student education (ESE) teacher with ten years experience of teaching at the elementary and collegiate levels. Prior to this study, the researcher completed her student teaching experience in a regular education, fourth grade, classroom.

Readers' Theater Groupings

Students were placed into three readers' theater groups of four based upon their reading ability as ascertained by their past oral fluency scores and reading level. Each group consisted of one female and three males. Oral fluency programs are considered effective if the students are given texts that are on their independent reading levels, therefore the groupings were based upon this component. One group was given plays that were on a higher reading level as it fit their instructional reading levels; the other two groups were given the same plays each week, written on their instructional reading levels.

Routine and Procedures

Readers' theater always took place during the morning, with students rotating

from independent reading work, to reading group with the teacher, and readers' theater group meeting with the researcher. Each group received individualized attention with the researcher working on their group's play. Each play was practiced on average for two weeks (or six sessions) before being performed for the pre-kindergarten classes, with an average of 10 to 30 minutes being spent on each readers' theater group's session. Each group performed three different plays during this eight-week period.

During the first week of implementation all three groups met together with the researcher for several mini lessons. In the lessons students imitated the researcher reading aloud, comparing and contrasting examples of fluent and non-fluent reading, with the objective of becoming more fluent and better sounding readers through readers' theater. The mechanics of scripts (e.g., words in parentheses are directions on what to do or how to say a line and should not be read out loud as part of your lines) were discussed.

Students also devised together three rules for readers' theater time: First was to refrain from interrupting or talking while another student was reading aloud. Second was to always be sure to follow along even if your part was completed. Third was to sit up straight as it helps one project one's voice, and always try one's best.

Each week thereafter, the following procedure was followed. On the first day of the week groups read the script silently to themselves first and then aloud with the group, the researcher assigned each student a role and provided that every child get the opportunity to have one small and

one large role within the eight week period. The researcher provided initial attention to helping the students decode unknown words.

On the second day the researcher modeled selected parts using inflection and intonation in reading the script. The students tried to imitate this form of reading and analyzed what effect this had on their ability to comprehend the story. The students would then practice aloud the script three times, paying close attention to projecting their voices, chunking words into phrases, and adding emotion.

On the third day the researcher would read the script aloud with the individual group as a whole three times before having the group practice reading independently. The researcher then pulled one of the students at a time from the group to practice echo reading of that student's part. Echo reading is when a teacher reads fluently and with emotion, inflection, and intonation for the student and the student mimics the way the teacher says the lines in order to get the feel of what fluent reading should sound and feel like. The researcher rotated at least two students per group for echo reading during that group's session.

The fourth day was more practice like day three, rotating the other students in for echo reading and giving feedback to the group as a whole on their readings. In the days that follow, until the performance day, students practiced the scripts and the researcher provided guidance, feedback, and modeling when necessary to the students. As students became more fluent they took on manipulating puppets.

Students were given copies of the scripts

to take home for homework during the week to practice their oral reading with a sibling or guardian. As stated previously, the goal of readers' theater is not for students to memorize the script, but to read it fluently with script in hand.

The second and third readers' theater performances were videotaped as a way to improve students' critical thinking skills. Video release forms were obtained and permission to record the performances was given by the parent or guardian. In the lesson following a group's performance the students watched their play with the criteria that they pick out two things that they did well and two things that they felt they needed to work on.

Findings

The survey provided estimates of students' attitudes toward reading. The first six questions were designed to elicit the students' comfort levels with reading in different contexts and situations. In reviewing the pre and post surveys the method used to determine a percentage of comfort level in a given area was done by giving each of the first six questions a numerical value per each emotion expressed. The excited or very happy face was given a value of four while the saddest looking face was given a numerical value of one. These scores were then divided into the total number of points possible.

Comfort levels with the first six questions on the pre and post surveys showed a two percent to 16 percent increase. While all questions increased in comfort, the most significant difference was found in the questions: "How do you feel about reading out loud in school?" And "How do you

feel when it is time for readers' theater?" The pre-survey findings showed a comfort level of 81 percent in how readers' theater made them feel. The post-survey findings found 95 percent of the students feeling the best about readers' theater. In reading out loud at school 52 percent felt comfortable in the pre-survey, in the post-survey 68 percent felt comfortable.

The seventh question asked students to write in what they perceived to be their favorite subject or part of the day. Most of the students said mathematics (45 percent) on the pre-readers' theater survey. Eighteen percent chose reading. No one indicated readers' theater. The post survey findings showed 37 percent choosing readers' theater as their favorite subject or part of the day. Only 27 percent chose mathematics.

The remaining questions were added to the post survey to study students' perceptions at the conclusion of the readers' theater program. Question eight asked students to write a short response on what was their favorite part of readers' theater. All students reported that using puppets or getting to perform for the pre-kindergarten classes were the most rewarding benefits. Question nine was designed to elicit information on the number of times students felt they needed to reread the material before performing it. Eleven students indicated they needed to practice between 5 to 8 times. One student selected the minimal number of 1-2 times.

When asked if they would like to do readers' theater again, 90 percent said they would like to do it each week and 10 percent wanted to do it only a few times a year. Students were then asked questions

intended to provide information on their perceptions of the routines and procedures utilized in the program. Specifically, we wanted to know which of the following strategies helped students the most with their oral fluency: reading it silently before reading out loud, reading independently with their group, echo reading with the teacher, practicing the script at home, and critiquing own group on video. Forty-nine percent of students reported they preferred to watch and critique themselves on video. Thirty percent preferred to read with their own group independently from others. Twenty percent chose echo reading with the teacher as being the most effective strategy, while one percent chose to read it silently before reading it out loud, and none of the students reported practicing the script at home to be the most effective strategy for them. The final question asked, "How has readers' theater made you feel about your reading?" Ninety-seven percent chose the facial expression which showed the most excitement.

Oral Fluency Scores

In the time between the end of January and the first week of April the oral fluency scores for winter and spring were tested. The number of words read correctly per minute increased overall as a class by an increase of 17 additional words read correctly in spring versus the winter. Increases individually ranged from the lowest of three words more per minute to the highest increase of 41 additional words read correctly. As a whole all but three students were considered one quartile below grade level for the spring scores, however all students achieved the spring scores that are

considered on- grade level for the winter test.

The data from this study suggest that the special education students did benefit from a readers' theater program. An analysis of the fluency scores revealed an increase in the number of words correctly read per minute in fluency tests. If these students increased their number of words read correctly by a quartile or more in an eight-week period, one can only imagine the gains of a yearlong program. As one student commented as he was completing the final survey, "I like readers' theater because it is helping me be better at reading and teaching me new words." The pre-kindergarten class teacher commented on their advancements in reading after viewing their final performance saying, "I had most of these students in my class the year before. I just cannot believe how much the way they sound when reading has improved, even since their last performance."

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to measure the effects of readers' theater on the literacy needs of low achieving readers. The results from this study indicated that the readers' theater program had a positive impact on reading attitudes and confidence level of the second and third grade students. It was evident that the special education students also made progress toward increasing their fluency scores. The small number of students involved, the lack of an adequate control group, and the short time span between fluency scores are limitations of the study. Further research is needed to measure the effects of readers'

theater on reading achievement for students with learning disabilities. However, a recommendation would be for all primary grades to integrate some form of a fluency program regardless of whether or not that fluency program is readers' theater.

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