

FOCUS ON INCLUSION

USING READERS THEATRE TO FOSTER FLUENCY IN STRUGGLING READERS: A TWIST ON THE REPEATED READING STRATEGY

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"The . . . children . . . crushed . . . the . . . chocolatey . . . treat . . . between . . . their . . . teeth . . . Their . . . dog, . . . Bandit, . . . looked . . . up . . . at . . . them . . . with . . . hopeful . . . big . . . brown . . . eyes . . . But . . . the . . . children . . . knew . . . that . . . dogs . . . should . . . not . . . eat . . . chocolate . . ."

Mike read the few sentences slowly, pronouncing the words carefully, each one isolated and distinct from its neighbors. Mike, a third grader of low-average reading achievement, has little difficulty decoding the words in his book. He and his reading partner, Ben, have already identified the words each child was unsure of, and between them, the two have generated plausible meanings. Why, then, does Mike read in a manner so hesitant and disjointed, pushing out each word as he does, one by one? Mike, like many children (and some older students and even adults), lacks fluency in his oral reading.

WHAT IS FLUENCY?

The National Assessment of Educational Progress has described fluency as the appropriate grouping or chunking of words into phrases that are characterized by correct intonation, stress, and pauses (NCES, 1996). The fluent reader has developed the ability to

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see larger segments and phrases as wholes and adroitly use these chunks to read and write more quickly (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1997). Samuels (1979/1997), one of the earliest scholars to emphasize the importance of fluency, described fluency as simply a function of reading speed and accuracy of word recognition.

THE ROLE OF FLUENCY IN READING

Why should the language arts teacher be concerned with fostering students' oral reading fluency? LaBerge and Samuels (1974) developed a theory of automatic information processing that describes the impact of skilled decoding on reading fluency. Samuels (1979/1997) posited that a fluent reader "decodes text automatically—that is, without attention—thus leaving attention free to be used for comprehension" (p. 379). The NAEP (1995) reported that higher levels of fluency were found to be associated with higher average reading proficiency, which includes the ability to understand and interpret text, make connections between the text and students' own personal backgrounds, and to analyze and critique aspects of the text.

HOW FLUENCY WORKS

There is some debate among scholars as to the nature of the relationship between fluency and comprehension. Some (e.g., Anderson, Wilkinson, & Mason, 1991; Hoffman, & Isaacs, 1991) hold that fluency is the result of good comprehension. Other researchers (e.g., Deno, 1985; Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1993; Stayter & Allington, 1991) counter that increasing fluency leads to deeper comprehension. Conceivably, the relationship between the two is reciprocal rather than unidirectional. Recall that fluent, expressive reading is marked by the strategic placement of pauses (Dowhower, 1991). Meaningful phrases, in turn, facilitate comprehension of the larger units of sentence, passage, and story. Better understanding of the text allows the student to read more quickly and accurately.

REPEATED READING AND FLUENCY

How can we increase students' fluency and thereby boost comprehension? One research-based strategy that has proven effective in increasing students' oral reading fluency is the repeated readings (RR) method. Rereading a text, as in an RR exercise, is an effective strategy in several areas. First, rereading the same passage has been

shown to significantly increase reading rate and accuracy (Carver & Hoffman, 1981; Chomsky, 1976; Dahl, 1974; Dowhower, 1987; Rashotte & Torgesen, 1985; Samuels, 1979/1997) and the ability to segment text into meaningful chunks (Dowhower, 1987). Second, many scholars (Chard, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1998; Sindelar, Monda, & O'Shea, 1990; Weinstein & Cooke, 1992) report that rereading a passage significantly increases comprehension. Third, the benefits appear to carry over to unpracticed texts. Dowhower's review of relevant research indicated that having the student practice one passage to a predetermined set rate of speed leads to increases in both fluency and comprehension in fresh passages (Dowhower, 1987; Dowhower, 1989).

The repeated readings method is effective with older students as well as with elementary school children. For example, Morgan and Lyon (cited in Dowhower, 1989) reported that after 3 months of practicing the RR technique, junior high poor readers in their study made nearly 12 month's progress in less than 7 months' time on a standardized comprehension test.

READERS THEATRE: MOTIVATING THEM TO READ

Many students engaged in RR activities become excited about their increasing fluency and relish the tangible evidence of their growing skills as they graph their progress (Samuels, 1979/1997). These students typically enjoy the challenge of beating their own previous fluency rate or competing against classmates. Other children are less motivated by competition, whether because of a home culture where competition is discouraged, individual personality, or the expectation of failure. Furthermore, some find the notion of reading the same text over and over absurd, regardless of the teacher's explanations.

A teacher may find that students who could profit most from the fluency and comprehension gains derived through RR are those who most strongly resist engaging in the activity. Recall the NAEP (1995) findings that dysfluent students tend to be less proficient readers. For many of these children (like Mike, mentioned earlier), reading is a tedious, lonely, unrewarding task; they are not motivated to engage in this laborious process by an assignment to read the same passage repeatedly, nor are they inspired by a tangible record of their struggle. The language arts activity of Readers Theatre, enjoyed by many students, seems to especially suit the needs and abilities of struggling readers and at the same time provides an authentic rationale for reading the same text repeatedly.

Readers Theatre “productions” afford students the opportunity to select, rehearse, and present short dramas to classmates or others without the stress of memorizing lines or the bother and expense of elaborate costumes or props (Connections + Language Arts, 1997). As students become familiar with Readers Theatre, they may wish to adapt short stories or other text to the script format or write their own plays to utilize in the activity. Students read from the scripts, focusing their energies on interpreting and sharing their understanding of a character through appropriate intonation and oral expression (Readers Theatre International, 1996–1997). The teacher can incorporate sound instructional practices into the activity by discussing characters and setting and by encouraging students to predict what will happen next and then prompting them to check their predictions (Saskatchewan Education, 1997). Readers Theatre has been used in language arts classes of all ages and ability levels (Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995).

Readers Theatre activities are appealing to children for a number of reasons. They are carried out in a cooperative format with peers, so the student does not feel isolated and alone as he or she reads. Many children are highly motivated to interact with their peers, and Readers Theatre allows them a sanctioned means to do so. Scripts often appear less daunting than other reading materials, since the student does not have to read the whole text alone. In addition, the parts each student is responsible for are interspersed with parts others are responsible for, affording students frequent little breaks. The activity calls for active participation by all students and so is more engaging than typical reading assignments; it is expected that students will move around as they “get into” their character. Roles are of varying lengths, thus allowing the shyest and the most gregarious children to select roles that suit their personalities. Readers Theatre activities permit children to interact with classmates and “play act” during time officially allotted for reading. And, in terms of a repeated reading activity, Readers Theatre provides reluctant readers with an acceptable, legitimate reason to reread the same text several times.

Rereading occurs naturally in the context of preparing for the performance. Students first read the text silently or with a peer in paired reading, depending on the ability and motivational level of the students. They read it again as everyone in their group (i.e., all the students who will perform a particular script) takes turns reading different roles in the process of getting a feel for the characters’ emotions, feelings, and different personalities. Students read the text again when they’ve chosen the role they wish to portray in the

context of one or more rehearsals. Students read the text a final time when, script in hand, they present their interpretation of the play to the class or some other appreciative audience.

Thus, Readers Theatre can be a viable and effective means of motivating children to read a text several times and thereby reap the proven benefits of the repeated reading strategy. Mike, the low-average reader introduced in the beginning of the article, found a purpose for reading and rereading in Readers Theatre activities. Usually one to avoid reading if he could, Mike actively sought opportunities to read the script, especially if he could do so with his fellow castmembers. For Mike, it was not a matter of working on another repeated readings assignment. He expressed his perspective of the activity in his exuberant call to his reading partner and fellow actor, Ben: "Come on Ben, let's practice our parts!"

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