Implementing Readers Theater in Secondary Classrooms

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IMPLEMENTING READERS THEATER IN SECONDARY CLASSROOMS

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This article describes how secondary teachers might implement readers theater in their classrooms. In addition to reading fluency, this five-day format also explicitly targets reading comprehension and vocabulary. Each day of the week requires students to engage in various activities aimed to develop diverse components of reading as well as prepare students for the weekly performance. During the process, readers theater provides an opportunity for students to engage in multiple readings with a text in more authentic context.

Research has indicated that reading fluency is a concern for both elementary and secondary teachers (Arnesen et al., 2017; Paige, Rasinski, & Magpuri-Lavell, 2012). Reading fluency is typically defined by its core constituents of word recognition, automaticity, and prosody. In other words, those who are fluent read accurately, at an appropriate pace, and with proper expression. Valencia and Buly (2004) found that 80% of fourth graders in their study who failed the state reading standardized test also struggled with one or more aspects of reading fluency. Because reading fluency is often a neglected reading goal (Allington, 1983; Dowhower, 1991; Young, Valadez, & Gandara, 2016), students who lack reading fluency in the elementary grades will most likely continue to struggle in middle and high school. Non-fluent readers agonize through textbook reading too, spending much of their energy and focus on decoding unknown words which interferes with comprehension (Deacon, Tong, &

Francis, 2017; Logan, 1988). Therefore, it is imperative that educators continue to develop adolescent readers' reading fluency through the use of appropriate research-based strategies throughout the secondary grades (Ortlieb & Young, 2016).

While there are debates about the legitimacy of teaching students to recognize words in isolation rapidly (Rasinski, Rupley, Paige, & Nichols, 2016), a strong evidence-base exists for the far-reaching implications of fluently reading words in meaningful contexts (Benjamin, 2017; Martin-Chang, 2017). More specifically, there is a strong correlation between the components of reading fluency (i.e. word recognition, automaticity, and prosody) and reading comprehension (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010; Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). Goodman (1964) first determined that students who read aloud with appropriate expression had improved levels of text comprehension. Some research even suggests that expressive oral language proficiency is linked to written expression in middle childhood and adolescence (Berninger, Abbott, Cook, & Nagy, 2017; Carretti, Motta, & Re, 2016), strengthening the claim for a focus on fluency beyond the elementary grades.

With the increasing focus on close reading in middle and secondary classrooms (Frey & Fisher, 2017), readers theater provides an opportunity for students to engage in multiple readings with a text, alongside hearing other (sometimes more) proficient readers (Oczkus & Rasinski, 2010). Students are afforded opportunities to witness their peers' literacy growth while honing their own craft, which solidifies the purpose and benefits of using readers theater. These positive literacy-related experiences often result in disrupting longstanding negative self-concepts and values toward reading in general (Ortlieb, 2015), as Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998/1999) described in their seminal piece, "I Never Thought I Could Be a Star: A Readers Theatre Ticket to Fluency."

Becoming a Fluent Reader

A multitude of strategies exist for improving a reader's fluency, but perhaps the most notable is readers theater, which requires

students to dramatically perform text for an audience (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Implementation varies, but most frameworks follow a weekly format. For example, on the first day, students choose their scripts. On the following days, students engage in rehearsal and/or various activities related to the script. Students perform their scripts on the final day of the week (Young, Stokes, & Rasinski, 2017). Readers theater is supported theoretically, conceptually, and by specific research at varying grade levels (Hall & Mahoney, 2015; Lin, 2015; Mraz et al., 2013).

The theory of automatic processing in reading (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974) posits that as readers become more automatic in word recognition, readers' cognitive resources are freed for other processes, such as reading comprehension. Students who read with automaticity read swiftly and effortlessly, and can better focus their attention on understanding the text (Aro & Lyytinen, 2016). From the theory, researchers conceptualized practice-based strategies that might develop automaticity. One such strategy, the method of repeated readings, is a well-researched and powerful means of helping readers become more automatic (Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000; Vadasy & Sanders, 2008; Vaughn et al., 2000).

Many students who have participated in repeated reading inventions demonstrate significant gains in word recognition automaticity as measured by words read correctly per minute. In a recent meta-analysis, Lee and Yoon (2017) analyzed 34 repeated reading studies from 1990 to 2014 and found that many variations of repeated readings had positive effects on gains in reading fluency. Researchers concluded that first reading the text aloud to the student followed by the student engaging in four repeated readings should have the largest effect on students' word recognition automaticity.

Tyler and Chard (2000) described a natural link between readers theater and reading fluency. Students engage in an authentic form of repeated reading, referred to as rehearsal in the context of readers theater. The process of rehearsing and the effects of intensive fluency instruction are beneficial for all learners (Rasinski et al., 2017). Though repeated readings consistently renders positive results (National Reading Panel, 2000), it not necessarily a motivating activity. Thus, the added

performance provides an authentic purpose for repeated readings, arguably increasing student engagement (Marinak, Malloy, Gambrell, & Mazzoni, 2015). Plenty of research exists that promotes its use in the elementary grades, but the research in secondary classrooms is somewhat limited.

Evidential Support for Readers Theater

The quantitative research on readers theater in elementary grades is substantial. Readers theater can increase students' reading fluency (Young & Rasinski, 2009), including word recognition automaticity (Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Martinez, Roser & Strecker, 1998/1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Young & Rasinski, 2018) and prosody (Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009; Keehn, 2003; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Studies have also reported significant gains in reading comprehension (Garrett & O'Connor, 2010; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Keehn, 2003). In addition, implementing readers theater can also increase elementary students' overall reading ability (Garrett & O'Connor, 2010, Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Vasinda & McLeod, 2011). With respect to affect or disposition, research has demonstrated that readers theater is a motivating instructional activity (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999; Worthy & Prater, 2002) that can also increase students' confidence as readers (Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009). Still, further research is needed on how older students view the experience of participating in readers theater in the classroom.

In a study conducted in Turkey, 72 11th grade students participated in readers theater for 4 weeks. At the end of the study, semi-structured interviews revealed that not only did students view readers theater positively but they also reportedly understood the value and impact the instructional activity had on their reading. Most saliently, the students enjoyed the social aspect of readers theater in that students were able to work successfully in cooperative groups (Karabag, 2015), whereby teamwork "serve[s] to motivate students to engage in more attentive readings" (Mansouri & Darani, 2016).

Keehn, Harmon, and Shoho (2008) conducted a quantitative study of readers theater in a middle school in South Texas. During the 6 week study, 36 eighth-graders were pre-tested and

post-tested on several reading measures, namely reading level, fluidity, expression, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Similar to studies in elementary classrooms, the results mostly favored the readers theater treatment. For the reading level measure, the treatment significantly outperformed control with a moderate effect ($\eta^2 = 0.239$). The treatment also outperformed control in fluidity with a small effect ($\eta^2 = 0.136$) and a moderate effect on expression ($\eta^2 = 0.274$). For the vocabulary learning measure, the treatment did significantly better than the comparison group, producing a moderate effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.269$). However, there was no statistical difference among the treatment and control groups on the basis of reading comprehension scores. Similar to the results observed with younger students, the qualitative findings suggest that adolescents who engage in readers theater are not only motivated but increasingly confident readers.

A number of studies such as Keehn et al.'s (2008) had limited durations in scope, small sample sizes, and even lacked a systematic structure for implementation, which may have contributed the insignificant findings for reading comprehension. Small sample sizes often result in low power, and therefore it may have been difficult to detect smaller effects (Busk & Marascuilo, 2015). Another possibility for the insignificant results on comprehension may have been the fact that the implementation of readers theater focused mainly on fluency and had no explicit connection to comprehension. Although the results were impressive and certainly establish rationale for the use of readers theater in the classroom, the argument may be strengthened by utilizing a framework that targets increasing reading comprehension and vocabulary as its primary goals. Thus, we offer a new readers theater framework developed specifically for secondary students.

The 5 Day Format for Secondary Classrooms

The following 5 day format for implementing readers theater in the secondary classroom targets reading fluency, comprehension, and word study. Each day of the week requires students to engage in various activities aimed to develop diverse

TABLE 1 Readers Theater + Comprehension and Word Study Format for Secondary Students.

Day	Building Fluency via Gradual Release	Comprehension	Word Study
Monday	Modeled Reading of text selections to be performed on Friday. Students listen critically and discuss the quality of the teacher's reading	As a whole group, class generates important questions while reading the script. Students complete vocabulary activity independently	Students skim through the text and circle unknown words
Tuesday	Paired Reading	As a group, students complete the vocabulary activity. Then, with a partner or trio, they write a summary of the text and orally critique the text by taking a position and discussing opinions. Then, they rejoin the rest of the readers theater group and share their summary, and discuss positions and opinions	Students refer to circled unknown words and determine their meaning using textual context or etymology
Wednesday	First Rehearsal	Students assign parts and rehearse in their assigned groups. Teacher rotates from one group to another coaching and giving encouragement and talking about the deeper meaning of the text. Then, students complete the vocabulary activity	As a group, the class chooses, discusses, and analyzes academic vocabulary (if any)
Thursday	Final Rehearsal	Class does a run through of the scripts and texts to be performed and students focus on	Make a list of important vocabulary words from the text to use in the oral retelling

(*Continued*)

TABLE 1 (*Continued*).

Day	Building Fluency via Gradual Release	Comprehension	Word Study
		using expression. Students complete the vocabulary activity. Afterwards, students retell the script in their own words to a partner. After the retell, students explain why or why not the text is enjoyable	
Friday	Performance	After the performance, with the entire class, students discuss what they liked most about their script and what could have been done to make the script even better	Before the performance, students teach the audience the meanings of the previously unknown words

components of reading as well as prepare students for the weekly performance (Table 1).

Monday. The teacher reads the texts (or selections if the text is long) aloud to the students. The first purpose of the read aloud is to model fluent and expressive reading, which adds entertainment value (Young & Nageldinger, 2014) and also aids in comprehension (Nichols, Rupley, & Rasinski, 2009). Adding appropriate expression can make texts read aloud easier to understand (Campbell & Hlusek, 2015). Second, the read aloud allows students to preview the texts and select their groups based on interest. It is important that students are given a choice to promote increased engagement (Marinak & Gambrell, 2013; Ortlieb, 2010). Finally, the teacher questions and critiques the texts and encourages students to think more deeply (National Reading Panel, 2000; Unrau, 2004).

The teacher can use a think aloud protocol to generate questions about the scripts and model the thinking processes used to determine the answers. For example, the teacher might model how to generate questions through a think aloud to

help readers interact and stay engaged with the text (National Reading Panel, 2000; Unrau, 2004). Furthermore, teachers can demonstrate questioning the text at various levels to promote higher-order thinking skills (Anderson & Krathwhol, 2001; Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956).

After the introduction of each text, students form groups based on their script preference. When students select and receive their texts, students read and/or skim the text and circle unknown vocabulary words. These circled words are discussed the following day with the other members of their group.

Tuesday. The day begins in small groups of students who are reading the same script. The first purpose of the gathering is to discuss and infer the meanings of unknown vocabulary that students circled on the previous day. The students may use any resources necessary to understand the meanings of unknown words, ranging from their peers and teacher to a dictionary or the Internet. Groups might also locate the word in the text, and attempt to infer the word's meaning through strategies like contextual analysis (Stafura & Perfetti, 2017). Discussions centered on vocabulary have been shown to increase participants' word knowledge (Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008).

Students read the script with a partner. In the case of odd numbers of students, a trio is sufficient. This format provides students with an opportunity to practice and become familiar with the text as a whole. Various styles of implementation exist, and thus the students might chorally read the script together aloud, or the students might, instead, take turns reading sections of the text. The partners essentially scaffold one another while practicing the text (Gnadinger, 2008). In addition, research on partner reading suggests that it can increase students' reading comprehension, fluency, and attitudes toward reading (Topping, 1989).

After completing the partner/trio reading, the students rejoin their groups and collectively construct a summary of the script. Research suggests that construction of summaries aids in textual recall (Spirgel & Delaney, 2016). It also requires students to think while reading and determine the most important aspects of the text to include in the summary (Saunders-Smith, 2017). The added collaborative component promotes discussion

of summary writing, including constructing topic sentences, determining importance, synthesizing, and integrating information (De La Paz et al., 2014). The key is to ensure everyone has a voice and that all of the components of the summary are addressed by the group. The task is only complete when each group member approves the summary. Through this social interaction and semiotic mediation, all learners work collaboratively and metacognitively to construct the ideal summary.

Once the summary is complete, a final discussion is held concerning individual group members' opinions about the text. The discussion should be brief, but everyone should have a chance to take a position and express an opinion about the script. This activity situates learners as evaluators of text, an important skill for being an active reader (Aghaei, Koo, Noor, & Rajabi, 2014). It is up to the teacher whether or not debates are encouraged. On one hand, everyone feels safe knowing that their opinions cannot be refuted; on the other, debates may serve as a medium for deeper understanding of the text and an appreciation for others' opinions and how they contribute to the larger conversation (Lekwilai, 2014).

Wednesday. On Wednesday, students choose their parts and engage in the first rehearsal. The main goal of the first rehearsal is to establish automatic word reading. That is, students should rehearse, focusing on learning to rapidly pronounce any difficult or unknown words. A sole focus on word recognition automaticity frees up cognitive energy to attend to comprehension and match what has been read aloud with expression to the meaning of the text (Cecil, 2017). Thus, students rehearse the text as many times as necessary to ensure accurate and automatic word reading. Some teachers require a certain number of rehearsals, and research suggests four in a sitting is sufficient (Lee, Templeton, & Yoon, 2016). Others prefer to set a time limit, and ask students to rehearse as many times as possible during the allotted time. Setting a time limit ensures all groups finish at the same time, which avoids the notorious question, "What do we do now?"

While students are rehearsing, the teacher briefly sits down with each group to engage the student in a higher-level discussion about their script to ensure students understand the

nuances and deeper meanings embedded in the text (Lin, 2015; Sallis, 2014). There is no definitive way to describe how this is done, because it will be dependent upon the script, the students in the group, and their contributions and responses (Young, Stokes, & Rasinski, 2017). The teacher, as a professional educator and stimulator of minds, facilitates Wednesday's comprehension goal – taking the students to a deep level of understanding through discussion.

After the rehearsals and teacher-led discussions are complete, the students recall and/or search the text for any academic vocabulary (Walton & Wiggan, 2014). If any are located, the students ensure that each group member has a complete understanding of the vocabulary and how it relates to the content of the script. The teacher should be available to assist should the students require further assistance (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2009).

Thursday. Students rehearse their scripts again and focus on using appropriate expression and practicing for the performance. To do this proficiently, students should have a deep understanding of the text to ensure their reading prosody matches the intended meaning of the text. Research has found a strong correlation between reading comprehension and prosody (Goodman, 1964; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006). Thus, it is imperative that a deep understanding of the text is acquired before the performance.

As before, the students are given ample time to rehearse and reminded that it is the last chance to rehearse as a group before the performance. However, students are encouraged to bring their scripts home to practice if necessary (Leavy, 2015). The teacher should meander from group to group ensuring that they are prepared for success. If the teacher identifies groups having difficulty, assistance should be provided. The goal is to have each group perform with accuracy, prosody, and confidence (Young & Rasinski, 2009).

After the rehearsal, students work together to discuss how they might retell their scripts. Importantly, students work together to identify key vocabulary to use in a retell. This activity not only helps students increase their word knowledge, but also encourages the use of newly acquired vocabulary (Beck,

McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). In addition, the ability to effectively retell stories is correlated with better reading comprehension (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maxwell, 1988; Shapiro, Fristchmann, Thomas, Hughes, & McDougal, 2014). Once the group members complete the task, they are instructed to pair up with a student from a different readers theater group and take turns retelling their scripts while incorporating the key vocabulary. After the retell, each partner takes a turn explaining why or why not their script is enjoyable. This requires students consider their reading preferences (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009), an often neglected process in language arts classrooms. In addition, it helps students focus on motivational and esthetic aspects of reading, which is important for ensuring students continue to read for enjoyment (Ellery, 2005; Schüller, Birnbaum, & Kröner, 2016).

Friday. On the final day of the week, students perform their scripts for an audience. It is imperative that students have an audience, because it strengthens the authenticity of their repeated readings (Colwell & Hutchison, 2015; Young & Nageldinger, 2014). The students rehearsed for a reason – the performance. Audiences vary and come in various forms. First, the other readers theater groups could serve as the audience. The teacher could invite other classes from the same or other grade levels, or take the show on the road and visit other classrooms. Performances can also be audio recorded or filmed and subsequently shared. Connecting with families in secondary schools is sometimes difficult, but essential (Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 2014), so the teacher could invite parents and other family members to weekly performances. Most of all, teachers should make it an enjoyable experience for all students.

Locating Scripts

First, the Internet is a prodigious resource for readers theater scripts (e.g. www.thebestclass.org). A quick search using the key words "readers theater scripts" reveals many sites that offer scripts for free as well as others that are available for purchase. Adding extra search times, such as "readers theater for middle/ high school" returns suitable results as well. In addition, there

TABLE 2 Transforming a Poem, Everlasting Voices by W.B. Yeats, into a Readers Theater Script.

Poem	Script
O sweet everlasting Voices be still;	**Narrator 1**: O sweet everlasting Voices be still;
Go to the guards of the heavenly fold	**Narrator 2:** Go to the guards of the heavenly fold
And bid them wander obeying your will	And bid them wander obeying your will
Flame under flame, till Time be no more;	**Narrator 3:** Flame under flame, till Time be no more;
Have you not heard that our hearts are old,	Have you not heard that our hearts are old,
That you call in birds, in wind on the hill,	**Narrator 4:** That you call in birds, in wind on the hill,
In shaken boughs, in tide on the shore?	In shaken boughs, in tide on the shore?
O sweet everlasting Voices be still.	**All:** O sweet everlasting Voices be still.

are scripts available in other languages, such as Spanish. Scripts are often also available in professional libraries in schools.

Other commonly used resources for scripts are existing stories; the possibilities are nearly endless. Teachers or students can transform any text into a script. For example, turning poetry into scripts is as simple as breaking the poems into meaningful parts and adding narrators (Table 2).

Fiction texts also make entertaining scripts, whether it be comedy, mystery, or any other variety. These, too, can be transformed into scripts. However, it becomes slightly more difficult, as the text is often altered to fit the readers theater format (e.g. Young & Rasinski, 2011). For example, the text might read: "We're going to need a bigger boat," said the chief. When constructing the script, there is no need for the phrase, "said the chief," and thus it should be eliminated. The important concept to remember after scripting a fiction text it to reread it for coherence, and analyze what needs to be included, excluded, or revised, while preserving the author's voice and intended meaning.

Of course, students can also create parodies of existing fictional texts, and therefore intentionally change the voice of the text and/or meaning. Creating a parody requires students to have a deep understanding of the original text in order to

restructure the script to parallel the original work, but perhaps utilize a different voice and transpose the original meaning. The process is complicated and involves a literary of literate processes (Young & Rasinski, 2011).

Teachers can integrate content areas into language by having students transform nonfiction texts into scripts. Students may transform and perform historical or biographical text, bringing the past to life for their audiences. Moreover, students have even scripted newspaper articles, updating their audiences on current events. Beyond social studies, scientific scripts help students recall important concepts like common cycles or biological mechanisms. Even high schoolers might enjoy playing the part the large intestine in a readers theater script about the digestive system. Though, the scripts can tackle even more advanced concepts, such as metabolism, thermodynamics, or neurological plasticity.

So, we suggest that teachers search the web, create their own, or engage students in the complex process of constructing their own scripts. These recommendations encourage educators to tap various genres, be creative, make parodies, teach concepts, and enjoy the versatility of readers theater.

Conclusion

The benefits of readers theater have long been known in the elementary grades; moreover, the significant correlations between fluency and comprehension provide a justification for using readers theater in middle and secondary classrooms. As a meta-strategy, that is a strategy that focuses on multiple areas of literacy development, readers theater promotes word reading, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension through its focus on re-readings, word study, recitation, and performance-based learning. The weekly model presented in this article provides a scaffold for how classroom teachers and specialists can integrate readers theater into their weekly planning in an effort to make literacy learning come alive. Lived literacy experiences not only increase adolescents' academic achievement but also affective characteristics of reading such as self-concept, value, and interest in literacy. Readers theater is an ideal strategy for diverse learners of all abilities and reading levels.

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