

# Readers Theatre: effects on word recognition automaticity and reading prosody

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In this quasi-experimental study, the researchers examined the effects of implementing Readers Theatre in a second grade classroom, comprised of seven and eight-year-old students. The 70 subjects were chosen as a non-probability sample from two different classes and served as the treatment ( $n = 29$ ) and comparison ( $n = 41$ ) groups. A repeated measures analysis of variance revealed statistically significant interaction and time effects. The post hoc analysis of simple effects indicated that the Readers Theatre treatment yielded larger effects on word recognition automaticity and prosody. Practical implications of this study suggest that consistent implementation of Readers Theatre in grade two classrooms can have a large impact on students' reading fluency.

What is already known about this topic

- Readers Theatre can increase students' reading fluency
- Readers Theatre is an engaging classroom activity

What this paper adds

- This presents a more rigorous analysis of Readers Theatre's effect on reading fluency
- This is the first Readers Theatre study to conduct inferential analyses involving a control and treatment group
- This is the first Readers Theatre article that compares mean difference effect sizes

Implications for theory, policy or practice

- Readers Theatre has a large effect on word recognition automaticity
- Readers Theatre has a large effect on reading prosody
- Students in classrooms that utilise Readers Theatre demonstrate greater gains in fluency than those classes who do not use Readers Theatre

Reading fluency is typically defined through its three constituents – word recognition accuracy, automaticity and reading prosody (Rasinski, 2010). Word recognition accuracy is the reader's ability to decode words without error. Automaticity refers to the ability that students read words swiftly and with minimal cognitive effort. A student's reading rate is typically used to measure automaticity (Good & Kaminski, 2002), and it is represented by words read per minute. Researchers (Young, Valadez & Gandara, 2016; Deno, 1985; Deno, Mirkin, & Chiang, 1982) have combined the accuracy and automaticity components to represent word recognition automaticity (WRA). Thus, WRA is measure of accuracy and rate, or words read *correctly* per minute. Finally, prosody is demonstrated when students read with appropriate expression that matches the meaning of the text. Prosody often assessed with spectrographic measures (Benjamin & Schwanenfluegal, 2010; Benjamin *et al.*, 2013) or fluency scales (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991; Rasinski, 2004). Because spectrographic measures are not often employed in the classroom, teachers typically rely on scales. There are two common scales for assessing prosody, the multidimensional fluency scale (see Zutell & Rasinski, 1991) and the Oral Reading Fluency Scale (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman & Oranje, 2005). Recently, González-Trujillo, Calet, Defior and Gutiérrez-Palma (2014) developed the Scale of Reading Fluency in Spanish, which is a reliable multidimensional fluency rubric for assessing Spanish speaking students.

According to Zutell & Rasinski (1991), the multidimensional fluency scale (MFS) is used to rate each reader on a 16-point scale, rating readers in four dimensions, expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness and pace. When considering expression and volume, students should read in audible voice and with expression that matches or reflects the meaning of the passages. When rating phrasing, assessors make sure students read in meaningful phrases and adhere to punctuation. Smooth reading is characterised by students reading without breaks or hesitations. Finally, students should read at a conversational pace, pausing for effect, or adjusting pace for expressiveness.

Reading prosody is an oft neglected component of reading fluency (Dowhower, 1991), but reading research has long described its importance. In 1964, Goodman claimed that students who read aloud with appropriate expression were more likely to understand the text. Most recently, Miller and Schwanenflugel (2008) measured the prosodic reading of first and second graders and found that those who read with adult-like reading prosody were more likely to better comprehend text by the end of third grade. Although expressive reading is not always necessary for comprehension and overall reading success, a high correlation exists claiming that students who read with expression are more likely to comprehend grade level texts. Thus, it is imperative that fluency instruction targets both WRA and prosody.

In 1979, Samuels described the method of repeated readings, a powerful approach to increasing reading fluency. Since then, a large number of studies confirm that repeated reading increases students reading fluency, especially in regards to WRA (Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000; Vadasy & Sanders, 2008; Vaughn, Chard, Bryant, Coleman, & Kouzekanani, 2000).

Repeated readings are often embedded in reading fluency instruction and interventions. For example, Wilfong (2008) reported on an instructional activity she called Poetry Academy. Students would choose a poem and rehearse it throughout the week. On the last of the day of the week, the students recited their poem to a parent volunteer. After implementing Poetry Academy for approximately eight months, the treatment group ( $n = 36$ ) significantly outperformed the control group on several measures, including WRA, reading comprehension and their attitude toward academic reading. Through

interviews, Wilfong determined that students in the treatment group also exhibited a more positive attitude toward school in general. Indeed, the repeated readings were likely responsible for the growth in WRA and perhaps even reading comprehension, but the authentic and innovative approach through poetry recitation may have been responsible for the shift in students' attitude toward reading and school.

Iwasaki et al. (2013) described another performance method where students learned one or two songs each week while reading the words as they sang. After implementing this karaoke-type classroom activity for an entire school year, all but one student made at least one year's growth in reading and several students exceeded the expectation for reading growth. Three years later, a quasi-experimental study (Young, Valadez & Gandara, 2016) confirmed that rereading and rehearsing songs for performance has large effects on reading prosody. Three second grade classes participated in the study. One class participated in 225 total minutes of reading while singing and outperformed a 'business as usual classroom' on several prosodic measures, and the effects were large: expression and volume ( $d = 1.45$ ), phrasing ( $d = .98$ ), smoothness ( $d = .98$ ) and pace ( $d = 1.24$ ).

Readers Theatre is yet another example of how to promote reading practice through repeated readings, and it also incorporates the performance component. Educators define Readers Theatre as groups of students who dramatically read a text for an audience (Young & Nageldinger, 2014). Typically, students engage in a weekly format, and the focus changes daily. For example, on Monday students select their scripts. On Tuesday, the students select their parts and participate in their first rehearsal and focus on pronouncing the words. Students focus more on expression on Wednesday while they rehearse. Thursday is often dedicated to the 'dress rehearsal' and groups practice their performance. On Friday, students perform for an audience (Young, 2013). Although Readers Theatre can be implemented in many ways, they all incorporate a key feature proven to develop reading fluency: repeated readings.

Tyler and Chard (2000) described a natural link between Readers Theatre and reading fluency. Because Readers Theatre requires rehearsal, students engage in an authentic form of repeated readings; therefore, it seems intuitive that Readers Theatre would increase WRA. In 2004, Griffith & Rasinski implemented a Readers Theatre protocol in the first author's fourth grade class and saw positive results on students' reading abilities. Some of the students demonstrated up to two years of reading growth, and others who were previously at-risk were reading on grade level by the end of year.

In addition to reading growth, students became more motivated and confident readers (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998; Rinehart, 1999). Arguably, motivation and confidence are important individual differences in reading that impact students' reading proficiency (Afflerbach, in press). Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) agree that motivation impacts reading growth and state that the more motivated and confident readers become, the more likely they are to be proficient readers. It is possible that Readers Theatre's unique implementation is directly related to the increased confidence and motivation. First, Readers Theatre provides multiple opportunities for practice. Students who might find the text difficult on the first read, become more proficient with each additional reading, as seen in Samuels' (1979) early research. When students experience success, they become more confident and motivated, and those two factors create efficacious readers (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Second, Readers Theatre provides an authentic reason for practice – the performance. Students are motivated by authenticity (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). In addition, students who may have found the text difficult previously stand side-by-side with their peers, reading aloud proficiently – which is another aspect of Readers Theatre found to increase confidence

(Martinez *et al.*, 1998; Rinehart, 1999). Therefore, Readers Theatre (and perhaps other similar activities) possesses several elements that not only increase reading fluency, but also other often neglected and unassessed individual differences in reading such as motivation, confidence and reading self-efficacy. Although reading fluency is widely accepted as an integral component of the reading process (Adolf, Catts, & Little, 2006; Rasinski, 2000; Eldredge, 2005; Nathan & Stanovich, 1991; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Schwanenflugel *et al.*, 2006), there is still less attention to the prosodic component of reading fluency as seen decades ago by Dohower (1991). In a descriptive study with second graders, Young and Rasinski (2009) confirmed that Readers Theatre positively influenced reading rate. The researchers also observed an increase in reading prosody, but did not provide any statistical analysis to further confirm the observations. In fact, published reports on Readers Theatre have been largely anecdotal, and thus the current study employs a more rigorous design to make a stronger case for utilising Readers Theatre in the classroom. The following study seeks to answer the following research question: What is Readers Theatre's effect on second-grade students' WRA and reading prosody?

## Method

### *Context*

Eagle Elementary is a title 1 school in the southern United States that predominantly serves Hispanic students (63%), 20% are white, 13% are black and 3% are two or more races. Many of the students are also considered economically disadvantaged (77%). Finally, 43% of the students in the school are learning English as a second language, some of which are in monolingual classrooms.

### *Participants*

Seventy second graders participated in the study. The treatment group ( $n = 29$ ) consisted of 28% girls and 72% boys. Thirty-one percent of the students were identified as English language learners. In the comparison group ( $n = 41$ ), 29% were girls and 73% were boys. Twenty-nine percent were English language learners. According to Chall (1996), students at this age are typically in what she called the 'Fluency Stage.' Chall essentially asserted that typical seven-and eight year-old readers move beyond a heavy reliance on decoding and begin to read with greater accuracy and automaticity (speed) in their word decoding, and thus it made sense to target students in this age range.

Both the comparison and treatment groups were taught by the same teacher over consecutive years; the comparison group did not receive Readers Theatre treatment while the treatment group did participate in the Readers Theatre intervention.

The instructional differences between the comparison and the treatment were minimal. The only planned instructional difference occurred during the first 15 min of the school day. Students in the comparison group arrived to school and immediately engaged in 'book-box reading.' In preparation for book-box reading, the teacher selects a variety of texts, usually five to ten, on each student's independent reading level and places them in their book-boxes. Every day when the students arrived, the book-boxes were on their desk, and they could select texts to read from the box. The teacher made an instructional adjustment the following school year for the treatment. Instead of book-box reading, the students

engaged in 15 min of Readers Theatre. It is worth noting that the intention was not to compare the two instructional methods directly, but to examine how implementing Readers Theatre, as an integral part of a classroom reading curriculum, impacted fluency. Thus, the following description of the instructional practices is simply to provide a clear picture of the classroom.

The instructional similarities between the treatment and comparison groups were many. Both groups (treatment and comparison) received instruction based closely on the balanced literacy model. The daily 90-min reading block consisted of a read aloud, guided reading, independent reading and word study. The read alouds also served as mini-lessons, and the majority of the lessons were adapted from *Reading with Meaning* (Miller, 2013). The teacher also delivered guided reading lessons to homogenous groups of students. The teacher followed Pinnell and Fountas' (2007) model for guided reading. Each guided reading lesson focused on three objectives, one for each of the following: comprehension, accuracy and fluency. While the teacher met with guided reading groups, the other students engaged in literacy workstations. These were self-directed stations that required students to conduct research, make words using letters, phonemes or root words, recite poetry and engage in a variety of comprehension strategies. During independent reading, students were encouraged to self-select texts based on interest and read for 25 min. Finally, for word study, the teacher employed Rasinski's (2010) method of making and writing words. To further illustrate the differences and similarities, see Table 1.

### *Instruments*

The researcher used the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) at pre- and post-testing to procure the students' WRA and reading prosody. The researcher timed the students while reading the grade-level passage from the TPRI and calculated the words read correctly per minute, which represented the WRA score. Word recognition accuracy refers to students' ability to accurately provide the oral pronunciation for written words. However, WRA refers to ability of readers to accurately recognise words with minimal cognitive effort. Minimising cognitive effort in word recognition allows the reader to apply her or his cognitive energy to higher level comprehension tasks.

One-minute oral readings is well recognised as a valid and reliable way to measure word recognition accuracy and automaticity (Deno, 1985; Deno *et al.*, 1982) and is highly correlated with more general measures of reading comprehension and proficiency. According to technical reports, the TPRI demonstrates high reliability and validity. While

**Table 1.** Differences and similarities between year one and year two.

Year one (comparison group)		Year two (treatment group)	
Activity	Duration	Activity	Duration
Book-box reading*	15 min	Readers Theatre*	15 min
Read aloud/lesson	10 min	Read aloud/lesson	10 min
Guided reading	30 min	Guided reading	30 min
Independent reading	25 min	Independent reading	25 min
Word study	10 min	Word study	10 min

\*Indicates instructional difference.

the student reads, the researcher also assessed their reading expression to calculate the prosody score.

Oral reading fluency rubrics have been identified as reasonable, valid and reliable ways for teachers to assess students' prosodic reading (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006). In the present study, students' oral reading performances were rated using the Oral Reading Fluency Scale (NAEP, 2002) and were awarded a score between one and four, the four being the most expressive. The researchers are established experts using prosody rubrics and previously assessed the reliability of their scores on the MFS. The researcher and creator of the MFS independently scored sample recordings of primary grade readers to establish a level of expertise. The resulting Kappa statistic was 0.77 ( $P < .0001$ ), which is considered substantial agreement among raters. Although the sample did not come from the current study, the strong Kappa suggests that the researchers are highly capable of accurately scoring young readers' prosody. A more recent study confirmed the reliability of ratings of fourth grade students' expressive reading using the MFS (Moser, Sudweeks, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2014).

### *Procedures*

Using a five-day format previously described by the Young and Rasinski (2009), students engaged in weekly Readers Theatre rehearsals and performances. On the first day, the teacher introduced the scripts for the week. Most of the scripts were downloaded from [thebestclass.org/rtscripts.html](http://thebestclass.org/rtscripts.html) and ranged from two to five pages. The scripts were mostly based on popular trade books, but we also used nonfiction and poetry. Students listened to the scripts read aloud and decided which script they might like to practice and perform that week. Once the students chose their scripts, they read the entire script for overall meaning and to determine which role they want to play. Each night, students were encouraged to take their scripts home for additional practice.

On the next day, students met with their groups and selected their parts. The students practiced their script and focused on word recognition; essentially, the teacher asked students to make sure they were reading the words aloud accurately. On the third day, students focused on expression with the teacher providing modelling and formative coaching. Students again rehearsed their scripts in groups and paid close attention to how they were reading aloud and whether the expression matched the meaning of the text. Day four was a time for a final rehearsal. Students stood and practiced in their groups as if they were performing. The teacher provided any last minute feedback in regards to their oral reading.

Finally, day five was performance day. The students either performed their script for each other, invited guests such as parents and school staff or administration, or other classrooms. Overall, the students spent about 15 per day and engaged in the Readers Theatre intervention for 35 of the 36 weeks of school for a total of about 2600 min. Whereas, the comparison group engaged in 2600 min of book-box reading.

## **Results**

The quasi-experimental study examined the effects of implementing Readers Theatre in a second grade classroom. The 70 subjects were chosen as a non-probability sample from two different classes and served as the treatment ( $n = 29$ ) and comparison ( $n = 41$ ) groups. In spite of unequal sample sizes, Levene's test showed that the homogeneity of variances

assumption was met ( $P = .73$ ). The Box's M significance value was greater than .001 ( $P = .051$ ), indicating that within-group covariance matrices were also equal.

All subjects were pre- and post-tested on two reading fluency measures, namely, WRA and reading prosody. There were no statistically significant differences between the treatment and comparison groups on the basis of the pretest measures of the two fluency variables WRA; thus, pre-experimental equivalence was assumed. The pretest and posttest means and standard deviations for WRA and reading prosody are summarised in Table 2.

Because of the large standard deviation of the WRA measure, the researchers further examined the data for normality. Inspection of Q-Q plots did not suggest a non-normal distribution. To confirm the visual inspection, the Shapiro-Wilk test was performed which also revealed the data were normally distributed for the pretest,  $D(29) = .98$ ,  $P = .83$ , and posttest,  $D(41) = .95$ ,  $P = .07$ . In addition, examination of skewness and kurtosis for all data indicated the scores were normally distributed and no outliers were detected.

A 2 by 2 repeated measures ANOVA showed that the interaction effect of the treatment and time on the outcome measure of WRA was statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = 67.17$ ,  $P < .001$ . To understand the nature of the interaction effect, analysis of simple effects was performed. In the Readers Theatre treatment group, the pretest to posttest increase was statistically significant,  $t(40) = -14.18$ ,  $P < .001$ , and the mean difference effect size was 2.21. The pretest to posttest increase was also statistically significant in the comparison group,  $t(40) = -11.90$ ,  $P < .001$ , and the mean difference effect size was 1.86. Group differences at pretest were not statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = 2.68$ ,  $P = .21$ ; however, posttest group differences were statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = 15.57$ ,  $P < .001$ . The group effect was not statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = 2.78$ ,  $P = .10$ . The time effect was statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = 462.26$ ,  $P < .001$ , and thus both groups showed some improvement over time.

A 2 by 2 repeated measures ANOVA showed that the interaction effect of the treatment and time on the outcome measure of prosody was statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = 9.25$ ,  $P < .01$ . For the purpose of post hoc analysis, simple effects were examined. In both the Readers Theatre treatment,  $t(40) = -7.34$ ,  $P < .001$ , and comparison,  $t(40) = -3.75$ ,  $P < .01$ , groups, the pretest to posttest increases were statistically significant, and the mean difference effect sizes were 1.15 and .59, respectively. Group differences at pretest were not statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = .03$ ,  $P = .86$  but were statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = 6.63$ ,  $P < .05$ , at posttest. The group effect was not statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = .193$ ,  $P = .17$ . The time effect was statistically significant,  $F_{1,68} = 71.70$ ,  $P < .001$ , suggesting that both groups showed some improvement.

The analysis of simple effects confirmed that both groups made statistically significant gains in WRA and reading prosody. Effect sizes were used to examine the importance of the findings. Effect sizes for both measures favoured the experimental group. The

**Table 2.** Means and standard deviations for WRA and reading prosody.

Condition	WRA				Prosody			
	Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Treatment, $n = 29$	62.72	25.13	127.55	35.56	2.21	.86	3.03	.73
Comparison, $n = 41$	70.32	24.36	99.36	24.25	2.17	.86	2.56	.78

comparison of within group mean difference effect sizes is summarised in Table 3. For both outcome measures, on the basis of pretest to posttest increases, the experimental group (Readers Theatre) made greater progress than did the comparison group.

### Discussion

When conducting classroom research, one hopes to find that both groups made progress. After all, teaching should impact students' learning regardless. When considering the treatment and comparison conditions, the results showed indeed both groups progressed in WRA and reading prosody. Therefore, the 90 min of balanced literacy instruction delivered by the teacher with either 15 min of Readers Theatre or book-box reading yielded significant gains. Because 15 min is only a fraction of the entire literacy block, it would be impossible to say that Readers Theatre is the sole reason for the growth. Therefore, this study perhaps also reinforces the notion that a balanced literacy approach indeed enhances aspects of reading fluency.

However, an analysis of simple effects revealed that the Readers Theatre treatment had a more profound effect on WRA and prosody. For WRA, both groups saw large effects, but the effects in the Readers Theatre group ( $d = 2.21$ ) were substantially larger than the comparison ( $d = 1.86$ ). As reported, repeated readings is proven to increase aspects of reading fluency, especially constituents of WRA (accuracy and rate; Samuels, 1979). So perhaps, the lack of repeated readings in the comparison explains the smaller effects. Of course, there were opportunities for students to choose to reread, for example, during independent reading. However, in the previous year's instruction, there was no formal instructional activity specifically dedicated to repeated reading like there was in the treatment. Thus, while the teacher's approach in year one did increase WRA, it had less of an effect than in year two when students engaged consistently in Readers Theatre.

For prosody, the treatment group experienced a large effect ( $d = 1.15$ ) while the comparison group experienced a medium effect ( $d = .59$ ). The effects in the treatment group were almost double the effects of the comparison group. This disparity warrants speculation. Farrell (1966) claimed that reading aloud was a means for increasing reading fluency, including prosody. This was the only instructional activity used in year one that specifically promoted prosodic reading, although one might presume that some elements of guided reading focused on prosody, but depended on the chosen fluency goals. And, according to the data, the comparison group experienced an increase prosody significantly and had a medium effect. The Readers Theatre treatment group's large effects on students' reading prosody could be attributed to the specific focus on expressive reading that is a primary and integral focus of Readers Theatre. The ultimate goal of Readers Theatre is to entertain audiences with prosodic oral reading through performance (Young & Nageldinger, 2014).

**Table 3.** Pretest to posttest mean difference effect sizes.

	Treatment group ( $n = 29$ )	Comparison group ( $n = 41$ )
WRA	2.21	1.86
Prosody	1.15	0.59

Effect size as measured by Cohen's  $d$ , .2 = small effect, .5 = medium effect, .8 = large effect.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. First, the quasi-experimental design utilised a non-probability sample with 70 participants. Because there is a need for classroom-based research (Rasinski, 2015), the researchers examined two different cohorts of second-graders which enabled the researchers to increase sample size. The sample size was large enough to identify interaction effects, but despite the differential effects in favour of Readers Theatre this is reported in this study, it could be strengthened with a larger sample. In addition, these methods were implemented in particular schools, so teachers should certainly consider contexts and tailor-fit Readers Theatre to best meet the needs of their students.

Because the treatment and comparison groups were examined across two different years, one might assume that one more year of experience for the teacher may have also had an impact on student achievement. The additional year of experience actually led to the teacher's professional decision to implement Readers Theatre in an effort to increase reading fluency. In addition, the number of students enrolled differed, and the size of the classes could have also had an impact. However, the present study had a high degree of ecological validity as it took place in an actual classroom environment complete with all the exigencies of classroom teaching that teachers face daily. Thus, the researcher did not control for possible confounding variables, such as IQ, or other reading proficiencies, such as vocabulary knowledge.

Of course, when considering the instructional differences of book-box reading and Readers Theatre, the results are not entirely unexpected. Readers Theatre allows for collaboration, affords students the benefits of peer and teacher feedback and has already been purported in previous research as a motivating and engaging instructional activity (Martinez *et al.*, 1998). Thus, there are many factors that could have also been responsible for the larger effects on students' reading fluency. However, a strong body of research exists that claims repeated readings is powerful method for increasing fluency, which is truly the foundation of Readers Theatre.

Overall, Readers Theatre appears to have had profound and positive effects on second-graders' reading fluency. Reading fluency is often referred to as the bridge to comprehension (Rasinski & Young, 2014). It is imperative that readers become more automatic and demonstrate swift, smooth and accurate reading. Fluent readers focus less on word recognition; rather their attention is focused on higher-order processes such as comprehension, the main goal of reading (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

As a result of engaging in Readers Theatre, students read more with appropriate expression, confidence and enthusiasm. Goodman (1964) found that students who read with appropriate expression were more likely to have higher comprehension. Thus, Readers Theatre can increase WRA and prosody, both of which are correlated with increased comprehension. The fun, engaging and motivational activity (Martinez *et al.*, 1998) also has the potential to build the foundation for proficient reading.

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