

An Exploration of How the Use of Readers' Theatre as a Teaching Strategy Affects Reading

Fluency and Comprehension

CSU Chico

Melissa Frasier

Abstract

This action research study examines the affects of Reader's Theatre on students struggling to read and understand social studies text in the classroom. The study was conducted in a general education classroom and included students who had a hard time comprehending what they were reading as shown by their inability to return to text to find the answers to questions about what they had just read. The study was conducted in a fifth grade classroom within a high need, rural elementary school district with students exhibiting a range in Lexile reading scores from lower level to advanced readers. The importance of this study is to explore the use of Readers' Theatre as a teaching strategy and how it affects fluency and comprehension when used with plays that correspond with the fifth grade social studies curriculum. The findings indicate a positive affect on both fluency and comprehension after implementation of Readers' Theatre. Areas for further research include connections between performing or reading aloud and a student's confidence in his or her reading ability as well as how the student's interest in the play content itself contributes to reading comprehension.

Keywords: Readers' Theatre/Theater, drama integration, fluency, reading comprehension.

How the Use of Readers' Theatre as a Teaching Strategy Affects Reading Fluency and
Comprehension

Introduction to the Study

Background

As a resident fifth grade teacher at a rural, high-need elementary school in Northern California, I teach in a classroom of 31 students who are classified at various reading levels. The expectation for fifth grade students is that they enter their fifth grade year with a reading Lexile score of 700L tested by their Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) assessment and end that same school year with a score of 800L on the SRI. The lowest reading score level in my classroom is 103L (below basic) while the highest reading score level in my classroom is 1059L (advanced). All of the students in my classroom are leveled for language arts classes based on these scores and teacher recommendations. The students are grouped accordingly during the instructional time slot of two hours each school day. This leveling of language arts according to SRI assessment scores causes students to rotate to the classrooms that serve their placement group, which means I may only have a handful or less of my homeroom students during this instructional period.

The student population is diverse with 0.7% identified as black or African American, 8.4% American Indian or Alaska Native, 4.2% Asian, 31.1% Hispanic or Latino, 13.3% from two or more origins, and 41.6% white. Total student enrollment was 286 based on the Student Accountability Report Cards (SARC) from 2011-2012, which are always published the following year. Out of these numbers of total students, 85.7% of our students are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, 9.4% have learning disabilities, and 16.4% are considered

English language learners. My classroom is a representative of this diverse population of students during homeroom instructional time.

Even though the students are leveled during the day for language arts, my homeroom students return to the classroom in the afternoon for social studies and science instruction, which has presented a challenge during the readings of text for this subject. Due to the varying levels of language arts abilities, there is also a variety of reading fluency and comprehension skills. This became painfully obvious during a class read aloud for social studies, where some students struggled just to read a paragraph while others could fluently read a half page of text. But even more obvious was the fact that students were having a hard time understanding what they had just read, and they couldn't even go back to the text to try and find the location of what they had read to answer some worksheet questions based on content in the text. These first exposures to reading the social studies textbook as a class prompted me to think about ways that I could change the instruction format to try and help all of my homeroom students not only with their reading fluency but also with the comprehension of the text.

This dilemma of reading fluency and comprehension of the social studies text brought to my mind the program of Readers' Theatre, which I had discovered while doing some research the previous summer. Readers' Theatre is defined as "a rehearsed group presentation of a script that is read aloud rather than memorized" (Flynn, 2004, p.360). I had always enjoyed acting as a young child, and memorizing script lines naturally came easy to me. As an adult, I have had experiences working with children in dramatic productions. This experience revealed to me that most children seem to enjoy performing in a variety of ways but are really nervous about memorizing their lines (unless it comes easy to them like it did for me) for the performance. As I was further introduced to Readers' Theatre, I discovered that it offered the fun of a performance

without the pressure of memorization of lines as well as offering the benefits of increasing a student's fluency through the repeated readings of the same text. Since Readers' Theatre is a reading strategy that offered increased fluency immediately, I was very interested. This started me thinking about using my social studies instructional time as a way to integrate Readers' Theatre for my students to increase their fluency as well as the comprehension of what we were studying. The formulation of an essential question for research was gradually coming to mind, but what is the purpose of action research in my classroom?

The purpose of action research or teacher research is that it informs the teacher's practices in his or her own classroom through inquiry (Hubbard & Power, 1999). The essential question that is posed for action research is often a personal one to explore through data collection, analyzing findings, and reflection. Qualitative inquiry allows for the meaning to emerge from the study and not impose variables or controls. The data speaks to answer the essential question or creates a new essential question to be explored further.

As I thought about social studies comprehension and fluency for my homeroom students and what I knew of the instructional strategy of Readers' Theatre, an inquiry question was forming. The Common Core standards for fifth grade social studies covers the broad content topic range of major pre-Columbian settlements through tracing colonization and immigration patterns of American people from 1789 to the mid-1800s. My research plan was to use historically based fictional plays or student-created scripts that tied into our curriculum of United States History to help not only my students' comprehension of the material but to affect their fluency. Using plays based on historical events that the class was studying could help my students' understand the content rich material by making text-to-self connections to bring history off the textbook page.

My concern about the low reading comprehension levels of many of the students led me, over a two month period, to this question: If I used Readers' Theatre as a teaching strategy, how would that affect my students? Since students would be exposed to the same historical play for a period of time, would they become more familiar with the text, affecting prosody? The other question I had when it came to the use of Readers' Theatre was if students are working with historical plays that correlate with the content we are studying, would acting out those plays in Readers' Theatre affect their comprehension of the material? Both thoughts led to the development of my question for the action research study.

Question/Purpose

How the Use of Readers' Theatre as a Teaching Strategy Affects Reading Fluency and Comprehension?

My essential question posed for inquiry has to be studied through action research in my classroom to see if integrating Readers' Theatre as a teaching strategy during social studies will affect reading fluency and comprehension of my students. This led me to formulate my research question: *How the Use of Readers' Theatre as a Teaching Strategy Affects Reading Fluency and Comprehension?* The research question serves my purpose because not only am I looking for teaching strategies to improve the skills of my entire classroom but also I am also interested in implementing strategies for benefiting the individual student by challenging each of them. As a group, we will be studying the same curriculum and standards for social studies but through the use of Readers' Theatre I can challenge my students individually. This challenge comes from selecting plays that will require students to portray historical characters that are very different from themselves, require students to read aloud in front of the group, and challenge students to

comprehend what we are reading by making connections to themselves and history. How are these historical characters lives similar to my students' today or how are they very different?

By implementing a program like Readers' Theatre and integrating it with our social studies curriculum, my goal is to bring history to life and make it relevant to my students'. In using Readers' Theatre as an instructional strategy, students will be reading scripts that are historical in content. Making those text-to-self connections through Readers' Theatre brings a deeper level of comprehension than by just studying the textbook. I want to activate my students' background knowledge by discussing our scripts and passages as we rehearse them, and by exploring the actions of our characters in relation to what was happening to them during that era in United States history.

According to Rasinski (2006), the gateway to comprehension is composed of three "key elements of reading fluency which are: accuracy in word decoding, automaticity in recognizing words, and the appropriate use of prosody or meaningful oral expression while reading" (p.704). Readers' Theatre addresses all three of these key elements. Most of the research in regards to Readers' Theatre as a teaching strategy focuses on fluency, so the area of my action research study that I hope might add new information to the use of Readers' Theatre as a strategy would be in comprehension. Will using historical plays affect the comprehension of the material we are already learning from our social studies text? Does reading aloud affect comprehension as well as fluency? By participating in Readers' Theatre will students make text-to-self connections by identifying with the historical characters they portray? This will be information to consider after all data and observations of the study are completed in regards to the effectiveness of the use of Readers' Theatre as a strategy for comprehension.

Theoretical Base

My research question about the use of Readers' Theatre as an instructional strategy stems from Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences as well as a need for fluency. Gardner (1985) believes that humans have a cognitive competence through a set of abilities, talents, or mental skills and he calls them intelligences or multiple intelligences (MI). Gardner states that all individuals possess the skills but the degree of the skills will vary from person to person depending on the combination of the skills. He has defined seven multiple intelligences and these multiple intelligences are unique to the individual (Gardner, 1985).

Readers' Theatre relates to the theory of multiple intelligences by connecting with at least five of the intelligences that include bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, musical, verbal-linguistic, and interpersonal (Gardner, 1985) through repeated readings, action and movement, and student interactions.

Research and studies by Griffith and Rasinski (2004) and Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, (2002) indicate that Readers Theatre improves reading performance because of the repeated practice of reading through the rehearsal of the script. These repeated readings benefit fluency and prosody as well as comprehending text meaning.

There is a need for fluency in reading and without it there is an inability to master vocabulary, which creates gaps in the readers' ability to comprehend what they are reading (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). The importance of children becoming fluent readers is crucial since most students will develop into fluent readers by the third grade, but 75 percent of students who are poor readers in the third grade will continue to be poor readers into high school and may not recover their reading abilities into their adulthood (Corcoran, 2005). Assessing fluency is important, but providing programs in the classroom that

support improving a student's fluency in reading are also important. According to Corcoran (2005), most classrooms "do not have programs that models oral fluency combined with independent practice" (p. 106). Readers' Theatre not only models oral fluency through the initial read aloud by the teacher, but it also allows for the independent practice of the passage throughout the week by increasing word recognition, speed, accuracy, and comprehension of the material (Worthy, & Broaddus, 2001; Homan, Klesius, & Hite, 1993; Samuels, 1997).

The definition of fluency has been debated by researchers, which can make it more complicated to determine what fluency instruction should look like. In the classroom, fluency is a goal for students but what does fluency look like? Rasinski (2006), notes the three elements of reading fluency as accuracy in word decoding, automaticity in word recognition, and the appropriate use of prosody or oral expression while reading, while others have looked at rate or expressiveness (Chomsky, 1976).

The use of Readers' Theatre as a tool to increase fluency through the repeated readings of skill level scripts or passages would appear to be a strategy that would address those areas of word decoding, automaticity, rate, and expression. One of the ways all components in fluency are initially addressed is through the modeled reading of the script or passage (the first reading) by the teacher and then the repeated readings throughout the week. A logical question to consider would be what would prompt a student to be engaged in repeated reading? Rasinski (2006) argues that in itself, repeated reading to improve fluency would not be a motivator for a student but the addition of the oral performance of the reading could potentially motivate the student to read a passage or selection multiple times. Hence, Readers' Theatre matches the need for students to engage in repeated reading for fluency instruction with the added component of the performance of the piece at the end of the practice period. Readers' Theatre is practical

because it requires minimal additional materials or preparation by the teacher; No extensive costumes or backdrops are needed. In addition to appropriate reading selections by the teacher, the only requirement is students' voices to express emotions and give meaning to the text, which are the other key components to fluency. Because of this, the strategy is economical to implement.

Research also indicates that fluency in oral reading and reading comprehension are connected in the fact that students who read orally with expression tend to understand what they are reading better when reading silently (Young & Rasinski, 2009). For students who are poor readers, poor comprehension would further the students' struggle with fluency. The automaticity that comes with oral fluency through a student's reading rate determines his or her ability to read text automatically without stopping to sound out words, but a question is then raised regarding the student's understanding of what he or she has read. Rapid reading does not equate necessarily with comprehension of what was read when the focus is only on fluency. One may draw the conclusion from this research that students can be fluent readers and still not understand what they are reading. All of this information led me to think of both reading fluency and comprehension together to form the research question of how does the use of Readers' Theatre as a teaching strategy affect reading fluency and comprehension?

Literature Review

The use of Readers' Theatre as an instructional strategy provides students with the benefits of increased oral fluency and reading comprehension as referenced in the study by Young & Rasinski (2009) and Corcoran (2005). By reading the same passage as a script multiple times or reading a predesigned script, students are building their accuracy in word recognition, automaticity in reading words effortlessly and correctly, and prosody using

expression and phrasing (Young & Rasinski, 2009) which are all important components to reading fluency. According to Garret and Conner (2010), and the National Reading Panel (2002), five areas important to comprehensive reading instruction are “phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency” (p. 7). Out of those five sections, reading fluency is often considered the one area that is most ignored when it comes to reading comprehension. In order for students to build their fluency in reading, they must be able to decode the material, have automaticity in recognizing words, and use proper intonation or pitch when reading a passage aloud (Garrett & O’Conner, 2010), both of which are components of reading fluency.

Acting Out Literature and Reading Comprehension

The use of drama in the classroom invokes higher order thinking, problem solving skills, feelings, and language when students strive to demonstrate what they know orally (Hoyt, 1992). Drama can be included in the language arts curriculum in a variety of ways, including acting out a story as it is read aloud, creating scripts using ideas from the students’ environments, readings or textbooks, or from taking on the roles of characters from literature and history to recreate important events and scenes. According to Harste, Burke, & Short (1988), the idea of trans-mediation is “a process of moving information from one communication system to another” (Hoyt, 1992, p. 581). This process takes the information and builds on what the child already knows. Drama allows for children to visualize what is being read in the passage and use their voices to create sound effects for communication of the story. These experiences contribute to the comprehension of the material, making it personal and allowing children to build on their schema of understanding separate from fluency. Because of this, Readers’ Theatre is an

effective way of including drama in the curriculum. Using activities that include drama allows students to use their voices for expression while reading aloud to increase fluency.

Kimbell-Lopez (2003), a professor of literacy and technology at Louisiana Tech University, states that Readers' Theatre is a format that not only engages the student in participation through the acting out of text, but that also enhances comprehension and interest in learning. With the added component of allowing students to create their own script, students are able to connect to characters in text by analyzing personality traits, developing a story map, and using colorful language to create visualization. Through these connections and extensions of text, readings can be meaningful to students and not just perceived by the students as words written down on paper.

Readers' Theatre Increases Reading Fluency & Comprehension

Readers' Theatre is a strategy that has been shown to be successful success in impacting reading fluency and comprehension when implemented in the classroom. Since Readers' Theatre is a "rehearsed group presentation of a script that is read aloud rather than memorized" (Flynn, 2004, p. 360), students are focused on reading what is in front of them instead of on memorization. During rehearsal sessions of 20-30 minutes daily, students read the same passage repeatedly. At the end of the week, that passage is performed by being read aloud in front of their classmates or another class. Since no memorization is needed, students may use the script and read directly from it, relieving the pressure to memorize. It is the repeated readings of the same material that builds fluency and prosody, which is one purpose of Readers' Theatre to increase fluency.

Since the three key elements of reading fluency that lead to comprehension are accuracy in word decoding, automaticity in word recognition, and prosody or oral expression (Rasinski,

2006), Readers' Theatre is effective in improving those areas of fluency as an instructional strategy through repeated readings. The scripts that students work with during the week can be curriculum-based or published scripts and stories. The idea of Readers' Theatre is that it can be integrated into the classroom by using what the teacher has already planned for his or her lesson or unit work, so a teacher can efficiently implement Readers' Theatre. Readers' Theatre does not need to be an additional program added in to an already busy day, but can be integrated in other curriculum areas.

A study was conducted with a group of students in Malaysia using Readers' Theatre when reading English literature. The purpose of the research study was to determine if instructors could motivate their students through the use of Readers' Theatre to want to read English literature in order to improve comprehension of the material prior to the intervention. Students were not motivated to read the English literature because the values and culture reflected in the literature were so different than their own. The literature selections used for Readers' Theatre were based on the literature component of the Malaysian English language teaching curriculum so that students would be able to develop "the ability to enjoy the experience of reading literature, understand and respond to literary texts in different periods and cultures" (Kabilan, M.K., Kamarudin, F., 2010, p. 132).

This study focused on 20 students (10 girls and 10 boys) with the average age of fourteen years old who were randomly selected based on their final semester scores which ranged from 70% to 80%, which classified those students as average to good regarding their proficiency in English language skills (Kabilan, M.K., Kamarudin, F., 2010). English was still considered a second or third foreign language for the students selected and also not their favorite subject. The data was collected based on a questionnaire completed by students as well as selected personal

interviews. Before Readers' Theatre there were a few items that had the lowest mean scores for the group in relation to comprehension such as "I understand the literacy text easily" and "I am able to remember the events in the literary texts easily" with a mean score of 2.40 and 3.10 respectively. After Readers' Theatre, those scores showed a positive increase to 4.00 and 3.45 respectively (gain of +1.60 and +0.35).

For many English learners, understanding the language itself is a struggle but trying to understand the deeper meaning of literature makes comprehension difficult. Instead of comprehending the text, EL students are confused. Since the study focused primarily on the comprehension levels of the students prior to the implementation of Readers' Theatre and measured it to their comprehension levels after participating in Readers' Theatre, the data suggests that students' comprehension did increase as a result.

Another area of The Malaysian study was to determine the motivation and interest levels of the students' to read the literature when they did not feel like they could relate to any of the material. In order to pique students' interest and motivation, "teachers should engage learners in experiential learning to facilitate enjoyment and enrichment" (Kabilan, M.K., Kamarudin, F., 2010, p. 133). Readers' Theatre provides the opportunity for students to use their voices and expression to bring text to life and personalize the text. General findings, according to the pre and post assessment surveys for this study by Kabilian & Kamarudin (2010), revealed that there was a +1.60 mean score increase regarding the question of comprehension of the text after using Readers' Theatre. Students reported improvements in visualizing the text, remembering events, and being able to relate to the characters. Small increases were noted in the areas of the students' interest and motivation in English literature. This might indicate the importance of

finding and selecting text that students can relate to motivate them to read, as concluded in the study.

Academic Gains in Oral Fluency, Word Recognition, and Reading Levels

Another study of the use of Readers' Theatre integrated with language arts was conducted with two second grade, inner-city classrooms. One class was comprised of Hispanic children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and the other was an ethnically mixed group of students of mixed socioeconomic compositions (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002). Over a 10-week period, Readers' Theatre was implemented for daily, 30-minute sessions. Books of varying reading levels were chosen for the scripts based on the students' varying reading levels. In addition, all books that were chosen portrayed characters that were facing some sort of dilemma (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002). Each book was made into a script and each student was given two copies, and one copy was taken home and the other copy was to be kept at school.

Pre and post assessments were conducted regarding students' oral readings of unrehearsed stories from the same or a similar series (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002), and nearly all students posted positive gains in their rate of reading. One student had a gain of 41 words per minute (wpm), while another student had a gain of 48 wpm. Overall the average rate increase for students was totaled 17 wpm. In comparison, the two adjacent classrooms that did not use Readers' Theatre showed only an increase of 6.9 words per minute (p. 326). There were also gains in the students' reading levels who participated in Readers' Theatre: nine students gained two grade levels, fourteen students gained one grade level, and five students showed no reading level gain (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002, p. 326). In contrast, the reading levels for the classrooms that did not incorporate Readers' Theatre reported that three students gained two

grade levels, thirteen students gained one grade level, and twelve students showed no reading level gain (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002, p. 326). A five point scale was used to rate fluidity, phrasing, and expressiveness of oral reading on the pre and post assessments indicated an improvement for all but four of the students who participated in Readers' Theatre. But of those four students, there was still at least a gain in one facet of oral fluency (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002). These comparisons between the classrooms participating in Readers' Theatre with the classes that did not participate showed a significant gain in words per minute and some gain in reading levels after the use of Readers' Theatre according to Martinez, et.al (2002).

Learning Disabled Students and English Language Learners (ELL): One Study

Another study explored the effect of Readers' Theatre for students who were classified as learning disabled students by measuring the attitudinal impact of a Readers' Theatre program on those second and third grade students. The study was intended to measure confidence in reading and overall fluency in the number of words read correctly per minute (Corcoran, 2005).

According to Corcoran (2005), Readers' Theatre was implemented over eight weeks. The students were given a survey pre and post assessment, and pre and post fluency scores were recorded. The participants consisted of twelve students in a self-contained combination second/third grade class with three girls and nine boys of mixed ethnicity (Corcoran, 2005, p. 105). All students had been identified with some sort of learning disability with varying degrees and included students labeled for special education services under the categories emotionally disturbed, attention deficit disorder, and even vision/hearing disability.

The findings of the study revealed a positive increase in comfort levels of the students towards reading (how it made them feel) and in reading aloud. In comfort levels there was a 2% to 16% percent increase, with the pre survey revealing a comfort level of 81% and the post

survey revealing a comfort level of 95% (Corcoran, 2005, p. 105). According to the pre survey regarding reading aloud, 52% of students reported feeling comfortable with a positive increase to 68% of students saying they felt comfortable reading aloud in the post survey, a gain of 16% (Corcoran, 2005, p. 106). Furthermore, Corcoran found that the oral fluency scores show positive gains of an additional 17 words per minute read correctly post-test as a group overall and individual ranges from 3 wpm to 41 wpm. This data suggests that the implementation of Readers' Theatre for the short eight week period had positive gains for these students with learning disabilities not only in the areas of increased fluency through words per minute but also in their attitudes towards reading aloud.

It can be concluded from Corcoran's research that the use of drama integration in the form of Readers' Theatre into curriculum in K-12 shows a positive impact on student confidence levels toward reading and oral fluency. Moreover, this research suggests that repeated readings of the same scripts or passages contribute to the prosody and automaticity of reading for students. The positive gains of recognition of more words per minute and increases in reading levels make Readers' Theatre a viable program that could be implemented as a strategy into daily instruction. The added benefits of this program are that a teacher can use curriculum-based materials with little or no additional cost and time.

In addition, student comprehension and motivation in reading improves after the use of Readers' Theatre as an instructional strategy according to the multiple studies cited above. By acting out text, students can make connections to their characters and story, bringing text to life application. Since comprehension is composed of reading fluency through word decoding, automaticity, and appropriate use of expression while reading orally, the use of Readers' Theatre

will address all of those components for students resulting in an increase in fluency and comprehension according to Corcoran, Martinez, et al., and the Malaysian study.

Methodology

For this study I implemented a Readers' Theatre program and schedule using plays that were based on corresponding social studies curriculum. The curriculum focused on United States history from the time period of early explorers in 1492 through the Revolutionary War period with my homeroom class, which consisted of thirty-one students with various Lexile reading levels.

My homeroom included a diverse student population for the study and included students who have 504 or IEP plans, GATE students', and English language learners. The data collection period spanned a total of eight weeks during the use of Readers' Theatre as a teaching strategy. Most of the Readers' Theatre cycle ran around eight days (not always consecutively). This allowed for four rounds or cycles of data collection for the Readers' Theatre program total.

The Readers' Theatre program schedule consisted of a seven-day program scheduled based on research completed in regards regarding how Readers' Theatre was usually implemented. Since RT was conducted with my homeroom, the only time available for the study was each afternoon when the students returned to the classroom after their intervention or enrichment classes. This schedule was adhered to except for minor adjustments for school events or activities, which extended the Readers' Theatre schedule for a few days longer than the intended seven days.

On the first day Readers' Theatre was implemented, students were introduced to the new play and assigned to groups based on their individual reading levels (high, medium, low) so that each group had a mixture of students from various reading levels. For the first round of data

collection two plays were chosen and groups were selected based on how many roles were in the play. Most of the groups were evenly divided and the group sizes were small, with approximately seven students per group. Each group was given time to self-select roles they would like to read with the knowledge that these would not be their final roles. Next, the students read through the play one time together in their small groups.

On the second day that Readers' Theatre was implemented, students joined their groups again and selected different roles to read through. This was the second time the play was read in the small groups.

By the third day, the groups practiced and read new roles again so that on the fourth day students would select their final roles and highlight them on the scripts after having practiced a variety of roles. If there was a dispute over which student would have a favorite role in the play, a round of the game of "rock, paper, and scissors" would be played to determine the winner of the role. During the practice sessions, students were encouraged to use props, motions, and various character voices to bring the play to life for the audience.

The performance readings of the play were presented on the fifth and sixth days in front of the class since there were so many students. I announced the play, introduce the characters, and announced any act or scene changes. I timed the performances, and I asked the audience questions after the performance about how they thought the group did, what they liked about the performance, and any recommendations for the group. The focus was on the audience input being positive, so any negative personal comments needed to be reframed as a suggestion.

On the seventh day of the Readers' Theatre implementation, the students were handed the exact same comprehension questions about their play to answer as they did on the first day. Students were allowed to refer back to their script if needed to answer questions.

For fluency measurement, a group of six students were chosen which consisted of three boys and three girls. Those students were selected based on their Lexile scores from their Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) assessment completed in August 2013. Within this group two students were assessed at medium reading levels, three students were assessed at high reading levels, and one student was assessed at a low reading level. To measure fluency, each of the selected students were given a copy of a passage from the play they had not seen before which they were assigned to work on for the week. This reading was called a cold read, and the student was timed during the reading. A running record of each student's "cold read" was created, and all missed words or errors were marked in blue for the cold read.

The same passage was read again by the student at the end of the week. Once the student had worked with the same script all week and had read the passage as part of the performance, a hot read was recorded. Red pencil was used on the same passage to note errors during the timed reading. Both cold read and hot read scores were scored to determine word count per minute and accuracy.

For comprehension measurement, each student read the play silently to his or herself first and then answered 3-4 short comprehension questions after the reading. Next, students were instructed to join their groups and choose parts to read. Each group read through the play at least once on the first day.

Data was collected from five different sources; cold/hot fluency passage readings for the study group of six students, pre/post comprehension questions about the play, teacher researcher anecdotal notes, Reading Feedback pre/post questionnaires, and a final Readers' Theatre student personal reflection form.

For the fluency data collection, the study group of students were selected based on mixed reading levels and selected for an even boy/girl ratio of three to three. The cold and hot reads of passages chosen from the individual student's plays measured words correct per minute (WCPM) as the play is first introduced and then again after the students had been working with the play for a number of days. Accuracy was also measured for both the cold and hot reads of the play.

The comprehension questions were administered at the beginning of Readers' Theatre after the play was introduced. The three questions were created from the play and used for the pre and post assessment to compare individual student responses.

Teacher researcher anecdotal notes spanned the entire Readers' Theatre implementation period and included observations on student performances as well as how I was feeling about the Readers' Theatre process. The Readers' Theatre personal student reflection form was developed after a discussion with my mentor teacher after our final Readers' Theatre performance when I had a candid group conversation with the class. It was suggested that I pose those candid questions to the group in writing, to allow me to analyze their reflections for the class as a whole and for individual responses about the Readers' Theatre experience.

The reading feedback form was administered to the class before starting the data collection period and then again at the end of the data collection period. The purpose of the questionnaire was for students to self-evaluate their attitudes about reading aloud, comprehension, and personal feelings about their reading abilities. Table 1: Reading Feedback shows the questions asked of students to measure their attitudes towards reading aloud and reading comprehension.

By tallying individual student responses to each question at the beginning of Readers' Theatre the responses were compared to the same feedback questions at the end of Readers' Theatre. In addition to noting group changes in answers, individual changes or no changes in the responses were compared to the first feedback form.

Table 1: Reading Feedback

Answer each question listed below by checking the box that you most agree with.

1. I like to read.

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

2. I like to read aloud.

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

3. I like to read in front of a group.

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

4. I get nervous reading in front of a group.

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

5. Reading is hard for me.

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

6. I have a hard time understanding what I read (what it means).

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

7. I think I am a good reader.

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

I can sound out hard words when I am reading.

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

8. Reading is easy for me.

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

9. I understand what I am reading when someone else reads it aloud to me.

1 Never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always
---------	-------------	---------	----------

How many hours this past week did you read for fun?

- a. none
- b. 1 to 2 hours a week
- c. 2 to 4 hours a week
- d. 6 or more hours a week

How many books have you read in the past month?

- a. None
- b. 1 to 2 books
- c. 2 to 3 books
- d. 3 or more books

Findings

Data for this action research project was collected in four sets. Each student was assigned to a small group and worked with only one play at a time for a total of four plays read by each student over the course of the research period.

Comprehension Questions

The comprehension questions were taken directly from the play, and there were only three questions to be answered for each play. The questions, which measured comprehension, were given to the students after they read their assigned play silently to themselves for the first time. The exact same questions were given to the students at the end of the Readers' Theatre period to answer again. Students were allowed to use their scripts for reference when answering the questions at both pre and post assessment.

As a class, there was a positive increase in comprehension scores post Readers' Theatre for each play for data sets #1-#3 and then a negative decrease for data set #4. One main difference between these four sets was that the last play selected for RT was a play that included the entire class of thirty students to perform altogether at once. The plays selected for data sets #1-#3 were broken down into smaller groups of seven-eight students depending on the number of parts available in the play. Comprehension scores showed increases from pre to post tests of .02, .19, and .18 and decrease of -.22.

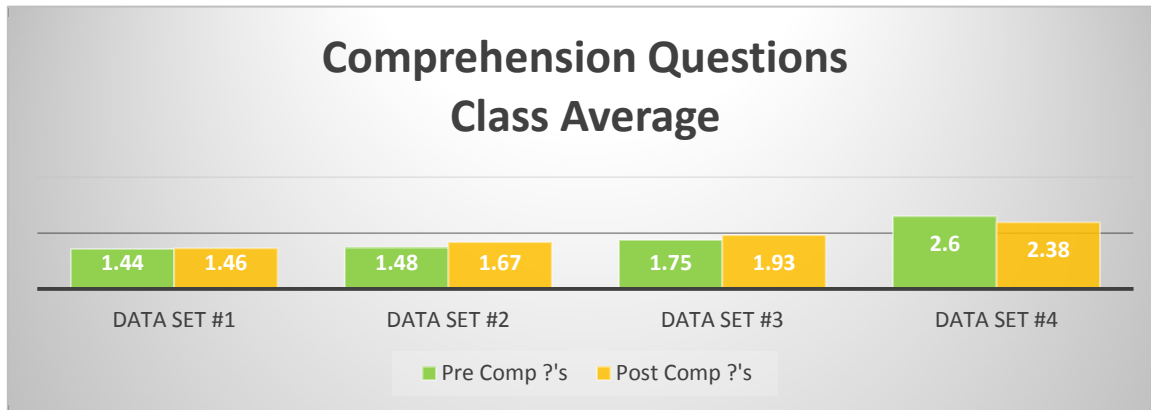


Figure 1: Class average scores for all four data collection sets for both pre and post comprehension questions.

In a further breakdown of class average comprehension question scores, boys' pre and post scores were compared to girls' pre and post scores. The results showed that both groups had a positive increase in their comprehension scores from the pre-test to the post-test for data sets #2-#3, and both groups had a negative decrease on the last data set #4 between the pre and post-tests.

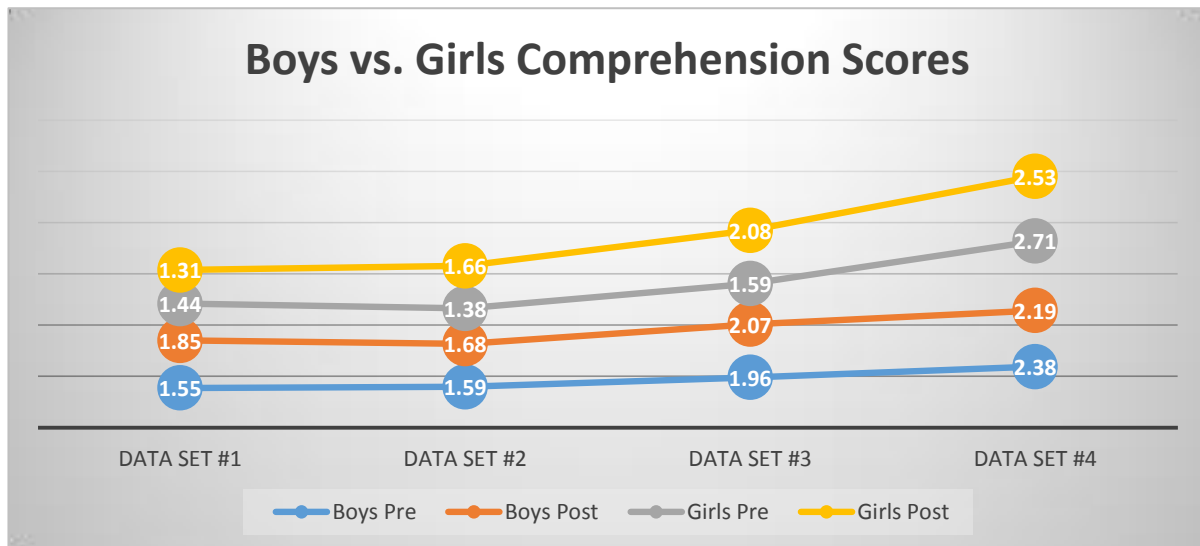


Figure 2: Comparison of comprehension scores of the boys in the class to the girls.

For data set #1, the boys had a positive increase of .30 between the pre and post scores but the girls actually had a negative decrease of .13 from their pre to post score test. The boys had an

increase in their comprehension scores by .30, .09, and .11 for the first three plays and a decrease in their comprehension scores by -.19 for the last play.

Cold and Hot Reads

Six students were selected for the cold and hot reads of the plays to calculate words per minute for fluency. Three boys and three girls were selected based on their Lexile scores to provide a variety of reading ability. The average range of Lexile scores for fifth grade is between 565L to 910L. The students' scores are shown as follows in figure 3.

Six Student Samples for Fluency	Reading/Lexile Scores (5 th Grade Standard=565L to 910L)
Student T29	943
Student H15	1059
Student J18	493
Student A3	337
Student S28	854
Student A2	696

Figure 3: The six students selected for the fluency data collection have Lexile scores that range from 337L to 1059L.

Each student in the sample group was given the same passage from the play script to read aloud for me. The student performed a cold reading of the passage at the beginning of the Readers' Theatre set and then performed a hot reading of the same passage at the very end of the Readers' Theatre set before the next play script was assigned. Scores were recorded based on how many words were in the passage, how long it took the student to read the passage, and how many errors the student made. The errors were subtracted from the total word count in the passage to reflect the correct amount of words per minute.

Average positive increases can be seen for all four data sets in word count per minute (wcpm) from the cold read to the hot read. Increases are as follows for each set of 25 wcpm, 27 wcpm, 34 wcpm, and 25 wcpm.

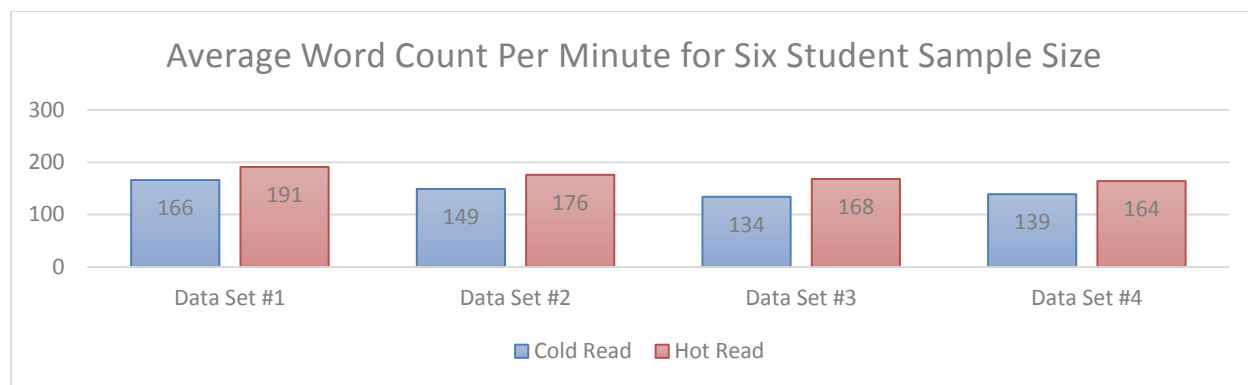


Figure 4: Average wcpm scores for cold and hot reads of the script passages for student sample.

In comparing the average scores of the three boys to the three girls, positive increases from the cold reads to the hot reads are also notes for all data sets. For the boys, wcpm scores increased about the same each time at 26 wcpm, 25 wcpm, 26 wcpm, and 22 wcpm. However for the girls, wcpm scores increased each time at 26 wcpm, 30 wcpm, with a significant higher increase for the last two data sets, 43 wcpm, and 79 wcpm. The Lexile scores for the girls reflected the lowest score in the group at 337L for A3 whereas the boys' lowest Lexile score for the group was 493L.

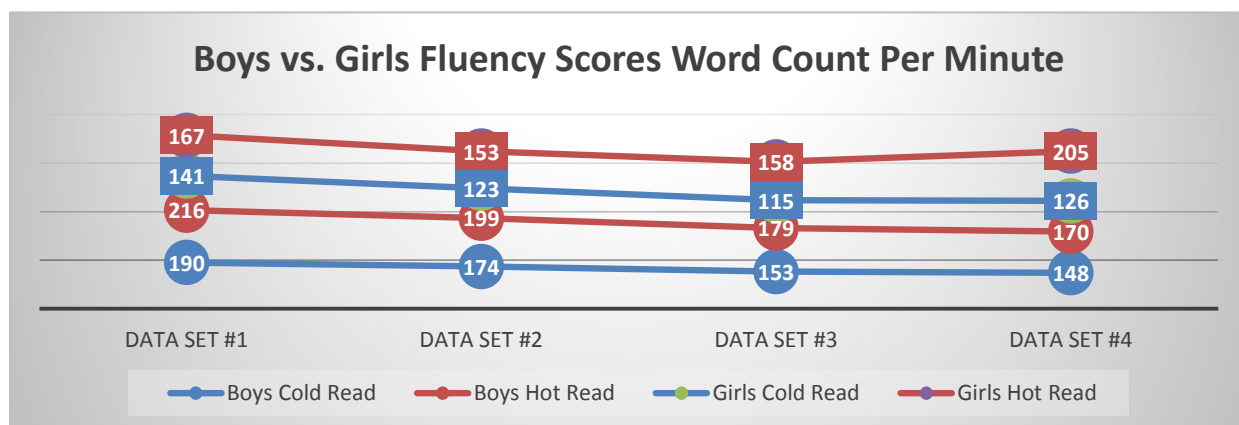


Figure 5: Average wcpm scores for the student sample group comparing boys to girls.

Individually, all students in this sample group showed positive increases in wcpm from the cold read to the hot read of the script. Since student A3 had the lowest Lexile score in the group at 337L, I wanted to see what positive increases in wcpm were attained.

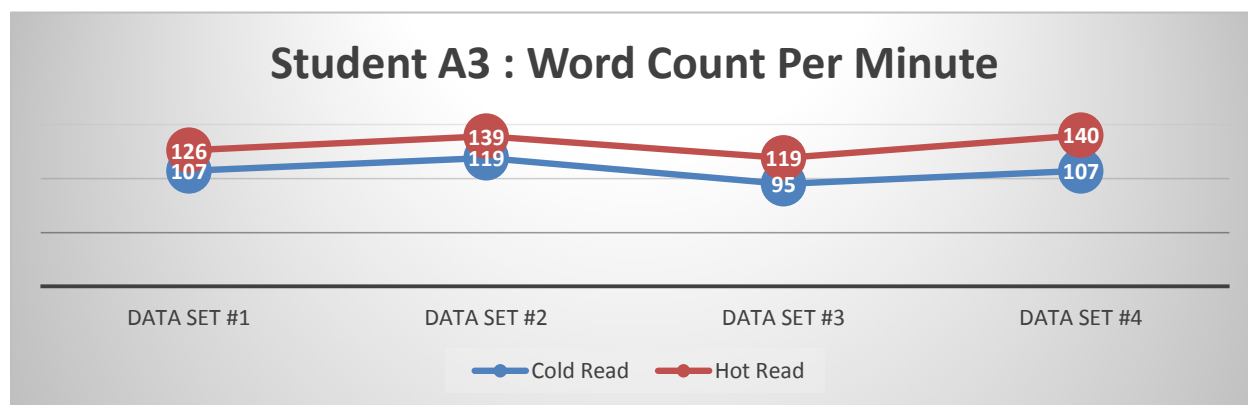


Figure 6: Student A3 wcpm for cold and hot script readings.

The word count per minute (wcpm) increases were as follows: 19 wcpm, 20 wcpm, 24 wcpm, and 33wcpm. This student increased her wcpm each set but had the most significant increase in set #4.

Reading Feedback

The reading feedback questionnaire was administered to the students at the very beginning of the action research project with a small introduction to Readers' Theatre and then administered to the students again at the end of Readers Theatre data collection period. The questions on the feedback questionnaire were self-identifying based on the students' perception of their abilities and attitudes about reading. Some of the questions were connected with fluency and some were connected with comprehension. Students rated themselves with the choices of never, sometimes, often, and always. Of those questions I selected the following from the survey to compare pre and post feedback student answers.

Question #5: Reading is hard for me. For question #5 there was not a significant change in student answers from the pre to post survey, with an increase of only 2 students answering "never" during the post response and an increase of 1 student answering "often".

Question #6: "I have a hard time understanding what I read", revealed negative decreases in post Readers' Theatre feedback. There was an increase in the post feedback of 13 students answering that they "sometimes" had a hard time understanding what they read. In the

post feedback there was also a decrease of 2 students who felt like they “never” had a hard time understanding what they read. Consequently, the results from the data for this question indicate the confidence of students in comprehension decreased after implementation of Readers’ Theatre.

Question #8: “I can sound out hard words when I am reading”, shows a decrease in the responses of “always” and “often”. During the post feedback response there was an increase of 2 students indicating they “always” can sound out hard words when reading compared to the post response of a decrease of three students who feel like they “often” can sound out hard words when reading.

Question #10: “I can understand what I am reading when someone else reads it aloud to me” shows an increase of 4 students who “often” understand when someone else reads aloud but a decrease of 2 students who answered that they “always” understand when some else read aloud. Another positive change in the previous results is a decrease in 2 students who felt that they “never” understand what they are reading when someone else reads it aloud.

Conclusions

The results from the data from this study indicated that there was a positive benefit in fluency and comprehension for students from the use of Readers’ Theatre as a teaching strategy. Based on these results, it is plausible to conclude that the use of Readers’ Theatre as a teaching strategy increases fluency and affects comprehension.

According to the students’ feedback questionnaire, their self-identification to questions regarding comprehension and fluency did not show a significant change from the pre to post questionnaire responses after the implementation of Readers’ Theatre. However, student responses to the reflection questionnaire indicate that they would not make any changes to

Readers' Theatre as it was implemented except to add more of the things that were their favorite parts of Readers' Theatre, which included sound effects, props, and performing.

Recommendations

For other teachers who would like to implement a Readers' Theatre program

Readers' Theatre student reflections about the experience revealed some common themes in the answers that appeared in many of the students' statements, with the occasional one or two students who had a definite reflection that was a stand-alone comment. Overall, students expressed enjoyment about the performance aspect of Readers' Theatre. Their observed reactions and the data indicated that if they could change anything about their experiences with Readers' Theatre, it would be to add more of the sound effects, to physically act out the play, and to use props to enhance the play.

Teachers using Readers' Theatre might find that their role changes from the role I described in this research project as my experience depending on their purpose for using Readers' Theatre in the classroom. For a comprehension focus, I would recommend spending more time talking about the script itself with the students, discussing vocabulary and content, and building background knowledge before starting to work with the play. Expanding on the script by showing video clips that relate to the subject matter or have a companion literature piece would help build background knowledge as well as help with comprehension of the content. In order to deliver their lines properly, students need to understand what they are saying and why it is relevant to the play.

If fluency is the main focus, I recommend to make time for all students to perform cold and hot readings of the scripts in order to monitor individual progression over the course of the year. Intonation could be focused on by practicing how to read the scripts aloud with the

students, making your voice carry the lines to give meaning to the play since fluency is defined as “reading smoothly, quickly, and with expression” (Tompkins, 2014). In order to have more data to measure fluency and comprehension, I would recommend to implementing this study over the course of the entire school year.

For further research

In my anecdotal notes, I recorded many instances of the performances and students' responses during the performance. Some students were more actively involved while others tried to hide behind their scripts. These notations lead me to some questions for further research regarding the motivation of students during performances and their confidence level in reading in front of a group.

For further research, I suggest examining the connections between performing or reading aloud and each student's confidence in his or her reading ability. This area could be explored in addition to his or her fluency growth. In the student reflections about the Readers' Theatre experience, performing in front of the class was identified as an enjoyable outcome of Readers' Theatre, which is the basis for my recommendations for teachers to try it in their own classrooms. Questions to consider for additional research would be to ask what the students enjoy about the actual performance and how they felt about themselves as readers after a performance.

Another area for further research would be exploration of how the content of the play or script affects the students' comprehension or interest in Readers' Theatre. For example, does the content of the script engage students to want to understand what they are reading or does it have the opposite affect resulting in less student involvement because students are not interested in the content of the play?

Implementing Readers' Theatre in the classroom for this study informed my growth as a teacher-researcher and contributed to my own practice. Since "teacher research is based on close observation of students at work" (Hubbard & Power, 1999), this study has had an impact on my teaching practice as I gained experience in gathering data for my reflection while working with the students. Through the continuing use of inquiry in the classroom, I can inform my own teaching practices for professional growth as well as providing opportunities for my students' collective and individual growth.

The process of posing a question, gathering data, examining the data, finding results, and reflecting has made me a better teacher. Understanding the process and purpose of implementing an action research project into the workings of a daily classroom provided me with ample opportunities to continue to grow in my teaching practices and reflections as well as how to share my findings with other teachers who want to grow in their practices too. According to Hubbard and Power (1999), teacher research is a gift that helps us to change the way we see old problems and provide new ways to looking at them (p. 290).

Action research has provided me the experience of the process behind the case studies and findings that I have read about in my literature reviews. Now I can be mindful of watching for opportunities in my future classrooms that would lend themselves to formulating research questions and gathering data to improve my own teaching practices, making the study very personal. I have learned how to gather data systematically and examine what I have collected to reflect on the questions I pose about my teaching practices. This information will be influential in reflections of my teaching and provide opportunities for further exploration and research.

References

- Armbruster, B., Lehr, F. & Osborn, J. (2001). *Put reading first: The building blocks for teaching children to read*. Jessup, MD: National Institute for Literacy.
- Chomsky, C. (1976). After decoding: What? *Language Arts*, 53, 374-390.
- Corcoran, C. A. (2005). A study of the effects of readers' theatre on second and third grade special education students' fluency growth. *Reading Improvement*, 42(2), 105-111.
- Flynn, R. (2004). Curriculum-based readers' theatre: Setting the stage for reading and retention. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(4), 360-365.
- Garrett, T. & O'Connor, D. (2010). Readers' theater: "Hold on, let's read it again." *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 43(1), 6-13.
- Gardner, H. (1985). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Harste, J., Burke, C. & Short, K. (1988). *Creating classrooms for authors*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Homan, S., Klesus, J., & Hite, C. (1993). Effects of repeated readings and non-repetitive strategies on students' fluency and comprehension. *Journal of Educational Research*, 87, 94-99.
- Hoyt, L. (1992). Many ways of knowing: Using drama, oral interactions, and the visual arts to enhance reading comprehension. *The Reading Teacher*, 45(8), 580-584.
- Hubbard, R.S. & Power, B.M. (1999). *Living the questions: A guide for teacher-researchers*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Kabilan, M.K., Kamarudin, F. (2010). Engaging learners' comprehension, interest, and motivation to learn literature using the Reader's Theatre. *English Teaching: Practice and*

Critique, 9(3), 132-159.

- Kimbell-Lopez, K. (2003). Just think of the possibilities: Formats for reading instruction in the elementary classroom. *Reading Online*, 6(6). Retrieved from http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=kimbell-lopez/index.html
- Kuhn, M., & Stahl, S. (2003). Fluency: A review of developmental and remedial practices. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95, 3-21.
- Martinez, M., Roser, N., & Strecker, S. (2002). "I never thought I could be a star": A readers' theatre ticket to fluency. *The Reading Teacher*, 52, 326-334.
- Rasinski, T. (2006). Reading fluency instruction: Moving beyond accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(7), 704-706
- Samuels, J. (1997). The method of repeated readings. *The Reading Teacher*, 50, 376-381.
- Tompkins, G. (2014). *Literacy for the 21st century*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Worthy, J., & Broaddus, K. (2001). Fluency beyond the primary grades: from group performance to silent, independent reading. *The Reading Teacher*, 55, 334-343
- Young, C. & Rasinski, T. (2009). Implementing readers theatre as an approach to classroom fluency instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(1), 4-13.