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“I never thought I could be a star”: A Readers Theatre ticket to fluency

Readers Theatre is a great way to develop children's meaningful and fluent reading. Here's the story of two classrooms that took Readers Theatre to new heights.

Five second graders make their way, scripts in hand, to the front of the classroom. They giggle with anticipation as they turn their backs to the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen,” their teacher announces, “The Readers Theatre of Room 313 proudly presents an adaptation of Edward Marshall’s *Fox in Love!*” Five performers turn on cue, and Juanita begins: “Well, wait until the girls hear about this!” She reads saucily, and the narrator’s words follow to explain that Raisin (played by Juanita) has just seen her boyfriend, Fox, with another girl. The second-grade audience frowns disapprovingly; the performance promises to be yet another success for the repertory group. As always, Fox’s cunning is trumped, and laughter and applause close the reading.

Engaged and fluent reading performances, like the one in which Juanita participated, came from children who weeks before read haltingly and without confidence. For 10 weeks, their language arts instruction included daily Readers Theatre experiences aimed toward increasing the children’s oral reading fluency. Because their practices were “rehearsals,” rereadings were both purposeful and fun. At the end of the 10 weeks, these second graders had made reading gains that were significantly greater than students in comparison classrooms.

As many teachers know, Readers Theatre is an interpretive reading activity in which readers use their voices to bring characters to life. Unlike conventional theater, Readers Theatre requires no sets, costumes, props, or memorized lines. Rather, the performer’s goal is to read a script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action. Besides the characters, the narrator has a special role in Readers Theatre. Narrators provide the cementing details and explanations that may be found in the original text’s narration, descriptions, or even illustrations. Although we realized Readers Theatre has been used to encourage students’ appreciation of literature and eagerness to read, we were interested in the influence of Readers Theatre on the fluency of second-grade students who need more practice to make their hesitant reading more fluid.



Readers Theatre is an interpretive activity in which readers use their voices to bring characters to life. Photo by Susan Strecker

Defining fluency

Although most teachers have fluency as one of their goals for children's reading, they frequently find it a struggle to explain what fluency is. As one teacher observed, "I don't know how to define it, but I know it when I hear it." Others offer explanations that are logical, yet incomplete: "Fluency is reading at a good pace." "Fluent reading is reading without errors." "It's reading with expression."

Even investigators who have looked closely at oral reading fluency don't seem to agree. Some have inspected rate (e.g., Chomsky, 1976; Dahl & Samuels, 1974). Some have broadened the lens to include accuracy as well as rate in their inspections of fluency (e.g., LaBerge & Samuels, 1979). Still others have looked at phrasing (e.g., Schreiber, 1980) or the use of prosodic features such as pitch, stress, pauses, and expressiveness (e.g., Dowhower, 1987; Herman, 1985). We considered each of these indicators when we inspected fluency. If demonstration of fluency depends upon appropriate rate, accuracy, phrasing, and expression, we

wondered whether Readers Theatre had potential to orchestrate all these fluency components.

What fluency instruction looks like

There are both logical arguments and observational evidence that Readers Theatre can support instruction in reading fluency. That is, the individual instructional features of Readers Theatre have already been associated with growth in fluency both in studies and teachers' testimonies.

Access to manageable materials. Students who are becoming fluent readers need manageable texts in which to practice (Allington, 1983; Rasinski, 1989; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991). The reading selection itself is an important element in building fluency. First, it's important to choose texts for Readers Theatre that are within the reader's reach. By definition, text within a reader's instructional range reduces word recognition demands and allows for more rapid reading. As rate increases, the reader is able to devote more attention to meaning and the interpretation of meaning through phrasing and expressiveness. That is,

accuracy, rate, phrasing, and expressiveness are all depressed when the text is too difficult.

Second, work within the world of oral interpretation suggests that stories with certain features are more easily adapted to Readers Theatre. Stories with straightforward plots that present characters grappling with dilemmas requiring thought and talk can easily be turned into scripts. For example, a strong script is likely to result from a story like Marc Brown's *Arthur Babysits* in which the main character grapples with an ethical dilemma. By contrast, a story like Alexei Tolstoy's *The Great Big Enormous Turnip* with sprawling, boisterous action begs for enactment; it almost demands that children form a chain to pull up that turnip rather than read the story from stools at the front of the room.

By listening to good models of fluent reading, students can hear how a reader's voice makes text make sense.

Third, Readers Theatre can also build on children's enthusiasm for series books. Feitelson, Kita, and Goldstein (1986) found that familiar story characters and settings are more easily grasped and better understood by young children. Similarly, if children meet the same characters in script after script, those characters become much like friends who have shared many different experiences. They can anticipate those recurring characters' reactions—even to new situations. When it's time to step into those characters' shoes, the children's portrayals of the characters become increasingly believable.

Effective reading models. To know what fluent reading "sounds like," students need to hear effective models (e.g., Bear & Cathey, 1989; Eldredge, 1990; Hoffman, 1987). Sometimes teachers request, "Read that again with expression," but children don't always know what expressive reading is. By listening to good models of fluent reading, students can hear how a reader's voice makes text make

sense. That understanding, more than exaggerated voice inflection, is the basis for expressiveness. When teachers read aloud the stories on which Readers Theatre scripts are based, teachers guide students into the sounds and meanings of those stories.

Rereadings. Students who have opportunities for repeatedly reading the same texts become fluent (e.g., Dahl & Samuels, 1974; Dowhower, 1987; Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1993). Teachers have understood for a long time that reading stories repeatedly improves fluency (as in Samuels, 1979). Chall (1983) argues that children at about second-grade level *choose* to read repeatedly for the sheer joy of becoming proficient. No longer glued to print, they "take off" in reading. People who observe these readers note their love of riddles and jokes and almost any kind of text that lends itself to being read aloud often. Hickman (1979) found that second and third graders were far less likely to want to talk about stories than younger or older children because they were so intent on practicing their craft. As 7-year-old Erin explained it, "It's like getting the training wheels off your bicycle. You just ride and ride and ride. Now I got reading. I just read and read and read."

Instructional support and feedback. Students who receive instruction and feedback are more likely to develop reading fluency (Koskinen & Blum, 1986; Rasinski, 1989). Students can gain insights into how to become more fluent readers by talking with their teachers and peers about how good readers sound. Immature readers sometimes describe good reading as "knowing every word" or "reading fast." With guidance, they come to understand that good oral reading also involves bringing the text to life by producing a defensible interpretation. Guidance can occur informally as teacher and children talk about a just-completed performance, or it can be a more planned demonstration of a strategy that fluent readers use.

Into the classroom with Readers Theatre

Given what we understood about fluency instruction, we introduced an instructional model for 30-minute daily sessions in Readers Theatre. The two second-grade classes that participated in the project were in inner-city

school districts. One class was composed of Hispanic children of low socioeconomic status; the other was an ethnically mixed group from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

Choosing the texts. Because the children in each classroom were at a range of reading levels, we looked for books of varying difficulty level, so that each child could meet with text within his or her instructional range. We looked for a body of works—a series—with interesting characters who meet ponderable dilemmas to ensure that children would come to know the characters well and thoroughly. We wanted texts that would provide a sufficient number (four or five) of recurring roles. In addition, we sought humorous texts.

For the lower level readers in the two classes, we chose Marshall's Fox series (for example, *Fox on Stage*, *Fox in Love*). The mid-range readers read scripts based on Marc Brown's Arthur series. We didn't find a series that seemed a perfect fit with the upper level readers in the two classrooms, so we chose, instead, a set of related books—tongue-in-cheek fairy tales written or illustrated by James Marshall (e.g., *Hansel and Gretel*, *Cinderella*). We knew this meant that the best second-grade readers in these classes wouldn't be meeting the same characters repeatedly (as would the other students), but the books they read were stylistically similar and the tales themselves were familiar ones. As soon as the groups were formed, they became three "repertory companies" and carried that designation throughout the project.

Preparing the scripts. The books were recast as Readers Theatre scripts with only these changes: Brief narration was added when necessary to describe story action revealed only by an illustration. Long narrations were sometimes divided into two speaking parts (Narrators 1 and 2). A portion of a script appears in Figure 1.

For every book we made two copies of each script for each child. The first copy was carried home so that each child could practice each of the speaking parts throughout the week. The second script, the "at-school" copy, had each character's speaking parts highlighted with neon markers. Teachers collected these second copies at the end of each day's practice session. During the week's rehearsals, children would pass along both the script and

Figure 1
Script for *Fox on Stage*

Narrator:	Fox wanted a part in the class play.
Miss Moon:	We must be fair.
Narrator:	The teacher put everyone's name into a shoebox.
Miss Moon:	Let's see who will play the pretty princess.
Narrator:	She drew out the first name.
Miss Moon:	The pretty princess will be played by Carmen.
Carmen:	Oh, goody!
Miss Moon:	And now for the part of the mean dragon.
Narrator:	Fox held his breath.

the role they had just read. Once the performance day's role was decided upon, however, they held on to the script with their own lines highlighted.

Organizing the repertory groups. The three repertory groups were organized in each classroom and each group read scripts based on texts written at appropriate levels of difficulty. Like real repertory companies, the players faced the challenge of regularly rehearsing new material (in this case, each week). The groups had a practice routine, and each player was asked to take on different roles each week. In some instances, a player even had to take on more than one part in a production. Again, like real repertory groups, the players knew they were rehearsing for a real audience. The companies staked their rehearsal areas in the corners of the classrooms. Their weekly instructional and performance routines are described in the sections that follow.

The weekly routine. Every Monday morning, the children looked forward to hearing their teacher read three new stories aloud. These were the stories on which the week's Readers Theatre scripts would be based. Because the teacher had practiced each story, as each was read aloud, the teacher made a special effort to interpret it in ways that would bring the story to life. After the second graders talked about the content and meaning of the stories, the teacher presented a minilesson designed to demonstrate and make explicit some aspect of fluent reading. For example, one lesson focused on why and when a good reader might need to slow down or speed up. In another, students discussed how a reader uses the

circumstances a character faces to decide how to convey that character's feelings. As a result of those lessons, when Maria played the role of Arthur in Marc Brown's *Arthur Meets the President*, her interpretation of Arthur's speech at the White House began slowly and painfully, "Good afternoon, Mr. President. When I think...about...what...I...can...do...to...make America...great...ah, ah, ah..." Maria explained her slow reading: "I know Arthur is embarrassed. He can't remember what he wants to say. Everyone is looking at him. Arthur hates that. His words are stuck."

Following the minilesson, the teacher distributed copies of the three scripts to the repertory groups. The students practiced reading the scripts either independently or with a buddy. At the end of the session, the children were encouraged to take their copy of the script home to do more practicing that night and through the week.

The anticipation of an audience is what made reading practice seem like a dress rehearsal.

On Tuesday, the students gathered in their respective repertory groups. The teacher passed out the second set of scripts to each group. On this set, specific parts were highlighted in color. Children practiced reading as a "company" for the first time. When they finished, the children passed their scripts to the left so that each ended up with a new script and a new role to practice. Rehearsal began again. The teacher circulated among the three groups, coaching and providing feedback. Coaching sounded like this:

- "Remember that D.W. just rode her bike for the first time. How do you think she might sound?"
- "Could you read that again and pause for the comma? Let's see if it makes more sense."
- "I noticed how you 'punched' the word *never* in that sentence. That really helps the listener get the meaning."

Feedback also came from other players and felt much like the collaboration found in Author's Chair: "Here's what I liked about the way Jazz read Arthur's part..." Scripts continued to be read and passed until the end of the session.

Wednesday's routines were exactly like Tuesday's. That is, students rehearsed by reading the highlighted part and then exchanging scripts to practice another role. In the final 5 minutes of the session, signaled by the teacher, students in each repertory company learned to negotiate and quickly determine roles for Friday's audience performance. The teacher encouraged the children to pay special attention to their performance role when they practiced their at-home copy of the script.

On Thursday, students spent the session working together reading and rereading their performance roles in preparation for the next day's production. During the final few minutes, students sometimes made character labels and discussed where each would stand during Readers Theatre performance.

By Friday, each performer was ready, having, on average, read the script or the story 15–20 times. Every week each repertory group performed before a live audience. The audience varied; some weeks the repertory groups read in other classrooms. Parents were sometimes invited for the performance. The principal, school librarian, or counselor were frequently in the audience. At other times, the class itself served as audience, as one repertory company read in front of the other two groups. There was great anticipation as to who the week's audience would be. The children themselves made lots of eager suggestions. "The audience effect was important," explained Ms. Carter, one of the teachers who participated in the study. "The anticipation of an audience is what made reading practice seem like a dress rehearsal."

As for "classroom management," the children settled fairly rapidly into the routines of their repertory group. At first, there were some warm exchanges about coveted roles, even though teachers made it clear that everyone would play every role, and that continuing roles would be rotated. Manuscript passing, role assignment, and turn-taking soon became routine. Like the procedures for Author's Chair, the routines for repertory groups (see

Figure 2
A 5-day instructional plan for Readers Theatre

Pre Day 1	Teacher chooses stories and develops scripts for each text.
Day 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher models fluency by reading aloud the stories on which the week's scripts are based. • Teacher offers a brief minilesson that presents explicit explanation of some aspect of fluency. • The teacher and students discuss each of the three stories. • Students begin to practice reading personal copies of scripts, reading all the parts independently. • Teacher encourages students to take these unmarked scripts home for further practice.
Day 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students gather in repertory groups. Teacher provides scripts for each group with specific parts highlighted. • Students read the script, taking a different part with each reading. • Teacher circulates among the three repertory groups, coaching and providing feedback.
Day 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedures are the same as for Day 2. • During the final 5 minutes, students within each repertory group negotiate and assign roles for Day 5's performance. • Teacher encourages children to pay special attention to their newly assigned performance role when practicing at home.
Day 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students read and reread the parts to which they are assigned within their repertory groups. • During the final 10 minutes, students make character labels and discuss where each will stand during the performance.
Day 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repertory groups "perform," reading before an audience.

Figure 2) became automatic, so that the focus moved toward smoothing the performance, as well as on enjoyment and showmanship.

What children gained from Readers Theatre

We made pre- and postassessments of students' oral readings of unrehearsed stories from the same or similar series we had used in the repertory groups. Over the 10-week project, nearly all of the children posted gains in their rate of reading. Some of these gains were dramatic. For example, Victoria read her pre-project text at 74 words per minute. By the end of the project, she read at 125 words per minute. Similarly, Rebecca's rate grew from 40 to 88 words per minute. Overall, there was an average rate increase of 17 words per minute for these second graders, while two similar classes of second graders who had the series books in their classroom libraries, but no Readers Theatre, gained an average of 6.9 words per minute. Even so, Readers Theatre experiences didn't affect the rate of every child. We puz-

zled over Patricia, for example, whose rate stayed exactly the same over the 10-week period. Hasbrouck and Tindal (1992) hold that 78 words per minute is an expected rate for second graders. Given that standard, 76% of our group fell below at the outset, yet at the end of 10 weeks, 75% had approached or exceeded the standard.

Gains in accuracy told us less. That may be because the materials "fit" the students at the outset. Each student's accuracy was already at an acceptable—or instructional—level. They got better, but there was little room to show accuracy growth in these texts. There were also gains in reading levels on the Informal Reading Inventories administered prior to the beginning of the project and at the project's end. For the children for whom all data were available, 9 gained two grade levels, and 14 gained one grade level. Only 5 children showed no reading level gain. Across the hall, in the two comparison classrooms, 3 children gained two grade levels; 13 gained one grade level, and 12 showed no gain in reading level.

Books for use in Readers Theatre

Easy books

- Alphin, E.M. (1996). *A bear for Miguel*. Ill. J. Sandin. New York: HarperCollins.
- Byars, B. (1994). *The Golly sisters ride again*. Ill. S. Truesdell. New York: HarperCollins.
- Byars, B. (1996). *My brother, Ant*. Ill. M. Simont. New York: Viking.
- Byars, B. (1997). *Ant plays bear*. Ill. M. Simont. New York: Viking.
- Eastman, P.D. (1960). *Are you my mother?* New York: Random House.
- Fox, M. (1987). *Hattie and the fox*. Ill. P. Mullins. New York: Bradbury.
- Kraus, R. (1970). *Whose mouse are you?* Ill. J. Aruego. New York: Aladdin.
- Marshall, E. (1981). *Three by the sea*. Ill. J. Marshall. New York: Puffin.
- Marshall, E. (1986). *Three up a tree*. Ill. J. Marshall. New York: Puffin.
- Marshall, E. (1994). *Fox in love*. Ill. J. Marshall. New York: Puffin.
- Marshall, J. (1993). *Fox on stage*. New York: Puffin.
- Minarik, E.H. (1957). *Little Bear*. Ill. M. Sendak. New York: Harper & Row.
- Wiseman, B. (1959). *Morris the moose*. New York: HarperTrophy.

Books for average readers

- Brown, M. (1991). *Arthur meets the president*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Brown, M. (1992). *Arthur babysits*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Champion, J. (1993). *Emily and Alice*. Ill. S. Stevenson. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
- Champion, J. (1995). *Emily and Alice again*. Ill. S. Stevenson. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
- Hall, D. (1994). *I am the dog, I am the cat*. Ill. B. Moser. New York: Dial.
- Johnson, A. (1989). *Tell me a story, Mama*. Ill. D. Soman. New York: Orchard.
- Marshall, J. (1986). *Wings: A tale of two chickens*. New York: Viking.
- Mazer, A. (1991). *The salamander room*. Ill. S. Johnson. New York: Knopf.
- Naylor, P.R. (1992). *King of the playground*. Ill. N.L. Malone. New York: Atheneum.
- Schotter, R., & Schotter, R. (1994). *There's a dragon about: A winter's revel*. Ill. R.W. Alley. New York: Orchard.
- Stevens, J. (1995). *Tops and bottoms*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
- Wood, A. (1988). *The horrible holidays*. Ill. R.K. Hoffman. New York: Dial.

Challenging books

- Ehlert, L. (1992). *Moon rope/Un lazo a la luna*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Karlin, B. (1992). *Cinderella*. Ill. J. Marshall. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Kimmel, E.A. (1992). *Anansi goes fishing*. Ill. J. Stevens. New York: Holiday House.
- Kimmel, E.A. (1994). *Anansi and the talking melon*. Ill. J. Stevens. New York: Holiday House.

We used a 5-point scale to rate students' fluidity, phrasing, and expressiveness of oral reading on the pre- and postassessments. This analysis documented improvement for all but 4 of the children. The remaining children improved in at least one facet of oral reading fluency, with most improving in two or even three facets. In comparison groups, 10 of the 28 children showed no improvement in oral reading fluency. The children who did show growth typically did so in only one facet of fluency (e.g., phrasing).

Readers Theatre seemed especially well suited to helping children go "inside" the story, experiencing the thoughts and feelings of the characters. As we observed in the two classrooms, we witnessed many instances of this. Sometimes a teacher probe assisted students in contemplating the meaning of a scene: "How is James Marshall's *Goldilocks* different from other *Goldilocks*? How can the voice of *Goldilocks* give the audience a clue to that difference?" At other times students themselves initiated discussion regarding oral interpretation that delved into comprehension on a deep level, as evidenced in this interaction about *Hansel and Gretel* (Marshall, 1990).

- Vicky: Your voice is too sweet. I don't think Gretel would talk nice to her stepmother.
- Jessica: That's what I'm doing. Gretel is being too sweet because she can't stand her. I want it to sound like phony, not like I'm really trying to be nice.

As expected, we found that the series books promoted familiarity with characters' personae. For example, Arthur's friend Francine was interpreted as a know-it-all smarty pants every week, regardless of the performer. Children also learned to expect certain types of story situations to occur in the series books. Leaving the classroom one Friday afternoon, Daniel called back, "I can't wait to see what trouble Fox gets in next week!" Such expectations for story can serve as a solid basis for interpreting future stories through Readers Theatre.

The teachers, Ms. Carter and Mr. Meneses, also attended to their students' enthusiasm for Readers Theatre. Reading practice as "rehearsal" proved to be a motivational method to encourage repeated readings. The "lure of performance" (Busching, 1981, p. 34) offered an incentive for returning to the text again and again, as students worked to bring the written

words to life for Friday's audience. Ms. Carter explained the pervading influence of the scripts in classroom life: "They read those [original] books during their reading time. They wrote about the books and their own plays based on the same characters. They wrote story extensions of the scripts. They also invited their parents to attend performances and repeatedly asked, 'Is it time for Readers Theatre?'" We found further evidence of the motivational power of Readers Theatre in the students' writing journals. Omar wrote, "Readers theater is the funnest reading I've ever did before!" Lucia wrote, "I never thought I could be a star, but I was the BEST reader today."

Conclusions

Readers Theatre seems to offer teachers a way to incorporate repeated readings within a meaningful and purposeful context. Creating opportunities for students to perform before an audience requires multiple readings of the text in order to achieve the fluency needed for the performance, and that practice works. Ms. Carter summarized the benefits: "I see two reasons why Readers Theatre helped my students so much. The first is comprehension that results from having to become the characters and understand their feelings, and the second is the repetition and practice." Encouraging appropriate oral interpretation not only assists students with their expressiveness, but also sharpens their insights into the literature for themselves and their listeners. As Coger (1963) states, "The study of the written page becomes fun, and reading it aloud deepens the reader's understanding of the text, for in reading it aloud the readers experience the writing more deeply" (p. 322).

Preparing a reading for an audience is a powerful incentive for reading practice. We observed the energy of students performing for a new audience. We observed changes in levels of confidence that a well-rehearsed effort produces. We also observed the changes in popularity of the books in the classroom library, and students who were content to just "read and read and read." They never seemed to tire of perfecting their craft.

Readers Theatre, then, offers a reason for children to read repeatedly in appropriate materials. It provides a vehicle for direct explanation, feedback, and effective modeling. Perhaps

Books for use in Readers Theatre (continued)

- Kroll, V. (1994). *The seasons and someone*. Ill. T. Kiuchi. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
- Marshall, J. (1988). *George and Martha round and round*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Marshall, J. (1990). *Hansel and Gretel*. New York: Dial.
- Martin, B., Jr., & Archambault, J. (1985). *The ghost-eye tree*. Ill. T. Rand. New York: Henry Holt.
- Mora, P. (1994). *Pablo's tree*. Ill. C. Lang. New York: Macmillan.
- Noble, T.H. (1980). *The day Jimmy's boa ate the wash*. Ill. S. Kellogg. New York: Puffin.
- Noble, T.H. (1984). *Jimmy's boa bounces back*. Ill. S. Kellogg. New York: Dial.
- Temple, F. (1994). *Tiger soup*. New York: Orchard.

due to the interplay of these influences, we found that Readers Theatre promoted oral reading fluency, as children explored and interpreted the meanings of literature (with joy)!

Authors' note

We would like to thank Claire Carter and Ed Meneses for sharing their insights about Readers Theatre.

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