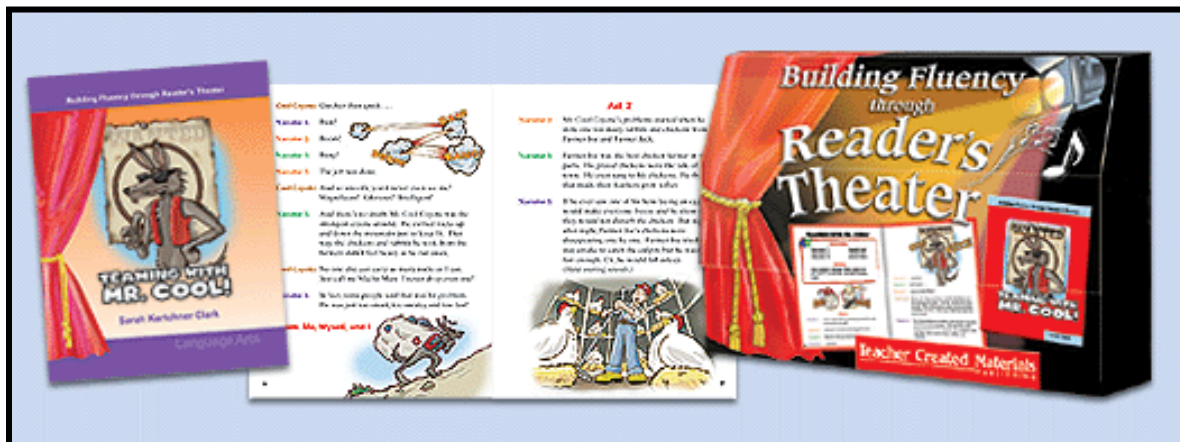


Research-Based Curriculum *Building Fluency through Reader's Theater*



Research-Based Curriculum

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Introduction

Building Fluency through Reader's Theater is a research-based program designed to implement strategies to teach reading, listening, and speaking skills. An extensive review of the literature on reading instruction as well as the use of Reader's Theater in the classroom was used in the creation of the program.

The program develops reading, speaking, and listening skills by having students read, listen to, and perform Reader's Theater scripts: The Reader's Theater model of instruction specifically develops the crucial element of fluency. The engaging themes of each script, as well as the motivation of classroom performance in an informal setting, lead to improved engagement in reading among students.

Building Fluency through Reader's Theater The program is composed of three kits in levels 1-2, 3-4, and 5-8. Each kit includes six copies each of eight reader's theater scripts. These are full-color, bound scripts designed for student use. Each script is modeled after a popular children's

book, and the script themes are designed to coincide with core reading program themes. The scripts are also tied to content area instruction for integration across the curriculum. Furthermore, each script is written to multiple reading levels. Roles in each script are written to easier and harder reading levels so teachers can differentiate instruction for students. The scripts are also designed to include all students equally regardless of reading level. Therefore, the main character is sometimes written for the lower reading level.

Lesson plans on the content areas and important themes covered by the scripts are included in the teacher's guide. The guide also includes ideas for teaching the children's books that the scripts were based on.

A CD with professionally recorded songs, poems, and script texts to use during the reader's theater is also included. Each script has one song and one poem performed on the CD. The CD also includes a recording of the eight scripts for second language learners or non-fluent readers to listen to.



Each script includes full-color illustrations for improved comprehension and student engagement.

Full-color overhead transparencies of song lyrics and poems from each script are included. A Teacher Resource CD with

copies of the scripts for home-school connection as well as other resources for the teacher comes with the kit as well.

Essential Elements of Reading Taught in the Program

Building Fluency through Reader's Theater incorporates Essential Elements of Reading Instruction as outlined in the National Reading Panel Report and *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read Kindergarten Through Grade 3* document developed by the Center for Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, funded by the National Institute for Literacy. These Five Essential Elements are: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension. ***Building Fluency through Reader's Theater*** helps develop both fluency and comprehension skills, which are two closely tied elements.

Fluency

According to *Put Reading First*, "Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly." Fluency is an important component of reading instruction. "Fluency is evidence that the reader is accessing the deeper meaning of the text. It is associated with rate, accuracy, and scores on comprehension tests." (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Furthermore, the research of Dr. Timothy Rasinski and others has found that repeated readings of the same text improve students' fluency even when given a more difficult, previously unseen text.

Reader's Theater performance is one of the few methods for providing students with a genuine reason to read the same text multiple times. Extensive reading fluency information is provided in the Teacher's Guide of each level of ***Building Fluency through Reader's Theater***.

Reader's theater gives students of all levels the motivation to practice fluency, because scripts are given to the students to practice for a performance. The students do not memorize their lines, and costumes and props are minimal, if used at all. The students must convey the meaning of the words using their voices; therefore, interpretation of the text becomes the focus of the activity.

For many years fluency instruction was not part of the regular routine in classrooms. As teachers moved to an emphasis on silent reading and round-robin reading, oral reading was neglected. Oral reading practice is required for fluency development. Fluency bridges the gap between word recognition and comprehension for readers.

Fluency is particularly important when considering children just learning to read. LaBerge and Samuels (1974) state that readers have a limited amount of attention to focus on reading. Those students who expend too much effort decoding words, lower their understanding of the material because their attention has not been focused on pulling meaning from the text. Teachers notice this phenomena when, after listening to a struggling reader, they find that the student cannot tell them about what they have just read. The struggling

student has used all available concentration just to decode the words and cannot grasp the full meaning of them.

The fluent reader groups words in meaningful ways as he or she reads. This can be observed during oral reading, which should closely resemble the reader's spoken language. Fluency is now seen as directly affecting and intertwining with reading comprehension (Kuhn and Stahl, 2000). It bridges the gap between word recognition and comprehension for readers.

In contrast, the child who reads fluently can use attention to focus on the comprehension of the printed word and thus, understands what has been read. The fluent reader has enough attention in reserve to make connections between the text and their own background knowledge, which gives this reader a much richer understanding of the material. Studies by Timothy Rasinski (1990) and Hooks and Jones (2002) found that grouping of words into phrases improves comprehension. When the text sounds like natural speech the children are better able to pull from their own knowledge and experiences.

Fluency does not happen quickly. It develops gradually and requires practice. Rereading is one way to build fluency. As adults, we have all experienced the need to reread something that we did not understand at first reading. It could have been a technical manual, a kitchen recipe, or even a newspaper article, but through rereading, we were able to pull the meaning from the words.

A 1979 study conducted by Samuels supported the power of rereading as a fluency builder. In this study students with learning problems were asked to read a passage several times. Each time the students reread the piece, they increased their reading rate, accuracy, and comprehension. The surprising thing about Samuels's study was that these students also improved on initial readings of other passages of equal or greater difficulty. Not only did their fluency increase on practiced passages, the fluency was also transferred to new, unseen passages.

Reader's theater is not only effective in developing reading fluency; it is capable of transforming a class into eager readers. It is one activity within the school day where the struggling readers do not stand out. With teacher support and repeated practice, all students can read their lines with accuracy and expression and gain confidence in their own reading abilities.

Comprehension

The *Put Reading First* document clearly defines reading comprehension as "the reason for reading." Furthermore, the strong connection between fluency and comprehension has been established through the work of Fountas and Pinnel, Rasinski, and others. ***Building Fluency through Reader's Theater*** addresses comprehension at all levels by providing specific lessons to teach content area information included in each script. Repeated readings and discussion of voice and intonation to use in the performance of the script also develop comprehension skills.

According to the Report of the National Reading Panel, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*, "The rationale for the explicit teaching of comprehension skills is that comprehension can be improved by teaching students to use specific cognitive strategies or to reason strategically when they encounter barriers to understanding what they are reading. Readers acquire these strategies informally to some extent, but explicit or formal instruction in the application of comprehension strategies has been shown to be highly effective in enhancing understand. The teacher generally demonstrates such strategies for students until the students are able to carry them out independently."

For example, when students read the lines of the wolf in "Teaming with Mr. Cool" they must comprehend the story to realize Mr. Wolf is portrayed as a sneaky character. Therefore, they would need to use the voice of a conniving wolf. Group discussions and readings help students develop this comprehension. Furthermore, each book is based upon existing popular children's literature, which also supports comprehension. "Teaming with Mr. Wolf" is based upon *Fantastic Mr. Fox* by Roald Dahl.

Reader's theater also enhances listening skills, vocabulary development, decoding, comprehension, and oral speaking skills. It is a simple tool that covers multiple aspects of reading and nets big gains in reading achievement for the students.

Scientific Evidence Describing the Influence of Reader's Theater on Student Achievement

While Reader's Theater has become popular in the classroom in just the last fifteen years, extensive scientific evidence exists to promote the use of reader's theater to build reading, speaking, and listening skills. The U.S. Department of Education's Put Reading First publication (2001) has this to say about reader's theater: "Reader's theater provides readers with a legitimate reason to reread text and to practice fluency. Reader's theater also promotes cooperative interaction with peers and makes the reading task appealing."

Research Supporting Repeated Reading

Morgan and Lyon also found repeated reading to be a helpful strategy for poor readers. Their study of junior high students in 1979 found that six months of repeated reading instruction gave the students over eleven months of gain on a standardized comprehension test.

While the research points to rereading as a powerful tool, accomplishing it in an actual classroom requires some thought. Many children balk at reading a selection over again. The struggling readers, who need it most, may be particularly unmotivated. If left to read silently, these students often pretend to read, and the advanced readers are bored by the whole notion of going through the text a second time when they feel that they understood it the first time.

The research on reader's theater shows that reading gains can be made, even when this strategy is used for short or

brief durations of time. Martinez, Roser, and Stecker conducted a 10-week study of second graders using reader's theater in 1999. The students received mini-lessons on fluency and practiced scripts at school for 30 minutes per day in preparation for an audience on Fridays. A copy of the script was also sent home for extra practice. The results of the study showed a gain of 17 words per minute over the 10-week period while the control group, who did not use reader's theater, made only half that gain. Informal reading inventories were then given to determine progress in overall reading and progress in comprehension. The reader's theater students demonstrated gains more than double that of the control group. Of the 28 students in the reader's theater group, nine tested two grade levels higher and fourteen moved up one grade level.

If the reader's theater script includes parts for several children to read or sing together, the students are also participating in a limited form of paired reading, which is another proven fluency strategy. In paired reading a stronger

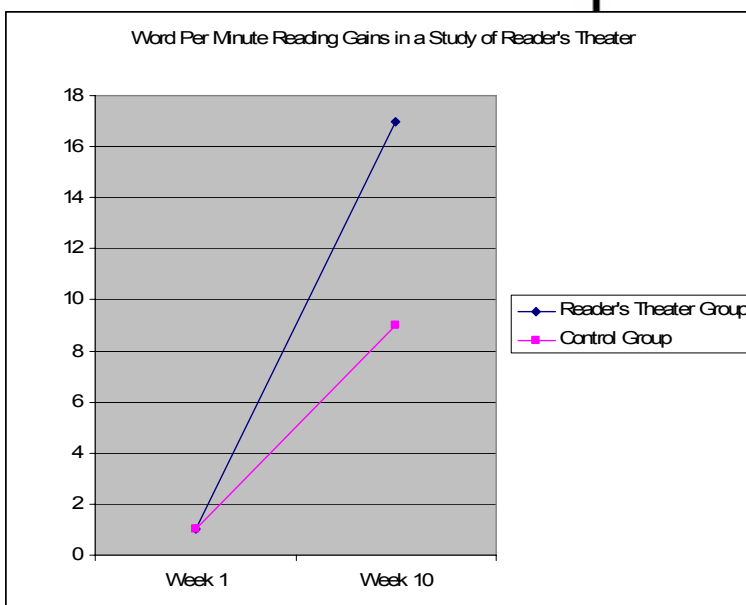
reader is put with a weaker reader. The better reader provides a model for the weaker one and helps him or her to move through the text at an appropriate rate. By listening to the fluent reader, the poor reader learns how the reader's voice, expression, and phrasing help to make sense of the print.

Research Supporting Paired Reading

Another strategy used in *Building Fluency through Reader's Theater* is paired reading. Paired reading is a method in which a student reading at a lower reading level is paired with a higher achieving student to read a text together. Research on paired reading has shown it to be beneficial. In 1985, Limbrick, McNaughton, and Cameron found that students participating in paired reading for six to ten weeks gained at least six months in reading achievement. In 1989, Topping found that students in another study made at least a three-month gain for each month of paired reading when this strategy was used for 10–15 minutes per day.

Research Supporting the use of Reader's Theater with Middle School Students

Traditionally, reader's theater has primarily been used to develop reading skills at the elementary level. However, this has changed in the last decade, where reader's theater is now regularly used in at the secondary level. Reader's theater has also been shown to improve the reading skills



of middle school students. Eleanor Albert (1994) found that reader's theater could be used effectively in the middle school classroom to improve reading fluency and comprehension, because it provides "expanded contexts for language learning in a cooperative social setting." Albert used Reader's Theater with middle school students in English classes and found marked improvement in both students' reading abilities and motivation to read orally.

Reader's theater is also beneficial for English Language Learners. Ratliff, in his work teaching adolescents who were English Language Learners, found it provides "...an oral stimulus for those unaccustomed to using imagination to experience literary works." (Ratliff, 1985).

Conclusions

In conclusion, *Building Fluency through Reader's Theater* is a program that teaches not only fluency skills, but also comprehension and vocabulary. The support materials included with the program such as the CD ROM with songs, and the illustrated scripts provide the necessary scaffolding for struggling readers and English Language Learners to successfully read. Oral language skills are also developed through the reader's theater model in a non-threatening environment. Students build fluency through repeated readings of the text. Perhaps most importantly, students have an authentic reason for rereading the text. The research of Dr. Timothy Rasinski and the National Reading Panel Report support the use of Reader's Theater to develop reading fluency among students. *Building Fluency through Reader's Theater* is an effective research-based program.

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