

Using Reader's Theatre to Improve Oral Reading Fluency

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

July 2013

Graduate Programs in Education
Goucher College

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of Reader's Theatre on the reading fluency achievement of first grade students. The mid-year/end of year oral reading fluency portion of the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Skills* (DIBELS) was used as the pretest/posttest for this study. A treatment group, receiving Reader's Theatre, and a control group were chosen based on similar pretest scores. Reader's Theatre was administered for five weeks, while the control group received the normal small group reading instruction. While the results of the study demonstrated that the students in both groups showed gains in oral reading fluency, the control group significantly out-performed the Reader's Theatre group on the post-test. This study contains internal and external threats to validity. Research concerning best practices for reading fluency instruction should continue; fluency is needed for strong independent reading comprehension.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Throughout life, reading comprehension skills are needed in order to be a member of a highly literate society. The main goal of the reading process is to comprehend and understand the text. In order for a reader to comprehend text independently, they must be able to read fluently. In kindergarten and in the beginning of first grade, students are learning the pre-requisite skills needed for fluent reading. These pre-requisite skills include building vocabulary, sound manipulation, phonetically decoding words, and remembering sight words with accuracy and automaticity. From the middle of first grade on, students should be improving their reading fluency at a fairly rapid rate each school year. Research has shown that in many cases reading fluency goals are not being met. “National data suggest that 40% of U.S. fourth-grade students are non-fluent readers” (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005 as cited in Begeny, 2011, p. 138). Non-fluent readers will focus on one word at a time when reading, sounding choppy and laborious, this in turn causes their reading comprehension to suffer.

In the early grades, reading fluency is usually taught through teacher modeling. Other teaching methods include having the class chorally read a story together, echo reading by repeating the teachers fluent reading, or listening to recorded stories. Encouraging students to reread the same text multiple times to gain speed is another way to improve reading fluency. Often, reading fluency develops naturally through the repeated practice of reading. If students are not motivated to practice on a regular basis, this can greatly affect their success with the task.

Reader's Theatre provides students with a script, teacher feedback, a week to practice, and then reading their part in front of peers. Reader's Theatre may offer a promising strategy to motivate students to practice on a regular basis. This research explored this strategy.

Statement of the Problem

Research has shown that students that orally read and reread the same text become better readers (National Institute for Literacy, 2006). The purpose of this study is to determine whether the use of Reader's Theatre, as a small group reading intervention, significantly improves first grade students' oral reading fluency.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is that the use of the Reader's Theatre strategy will not make a statistically significant difference in the oral reading fluency scores of first grade students when their pretest results on the oral reading fluency portion of the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Skills* (DIBELS) assessment are compared with their post-test scores on the same assessment five weeks later.

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study ***oral reading fluency*** is operationally defined as the number of words a student can read accurately from a grade-level text in one minute on the oral reading fluency portion of the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Skills* (DIBELS) assessment. The goal for the end of first grade is to read 47 words in one minute. The dependent variable in this study is the difference in students' initial oral reading fluency scores on the DIBELS oral

reading fluency assessment versus their performance five weeks later. The independent variable was the Reader's Theatre intervention program.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Oral reading fluency is sometimes disregarded during reading instruction in the elementary grades. In 2006, the National Institute for Literacy identified fluency as one of five essential areas of reading instruction. Data suggests that oral reading fluency is a problem for many elementary school children (Marr, Algozzine, Nicholson, Dugan, 2011). Reading fluency is a significant part of the reading process. This review of the literature will be organized in the following sections: (1) a definition and the relevance of reading fluency; (2) why students struggle with reading fluency; and (3) types of interventions that teachers can use in their classrooms to improve reading fluency.

Definition and Relevance of Reading Fluency

Reading fluency can be defined as the ability to read text rapidly, smoothly, with few errors, and with appropriate expression (Graves, Juel, Graves & Dewitz, 2011). Oral reading fluency is broken down into three specific areas: accuracy, automaticity, and expression or prosody. Accuracy is when the reader pronounces the words correctly and makes few errors or miscues. Automaticity is demonstrated by speed, effortlessness, autonomy, and lack of conscious awareness of the reader (Logan, as cited in Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010). To read with expression or prosody means that attention is given to the phrasing and punctuation in the text by changing the tone of the voice to convey meaning. Therefore, speed should not always be the goal with reading fluency, but rather the goal is engaged reading for the purpose of meaning. Fluent reading should be at the same rate and should sound much like conversational speech. A balance between accuracy, automaticity, and expression are all needed in order for oral reading to be fluent.

The academic importance of reading fluency has been studied more closely in the past twenty to thirty years. The National Institute for Literacy (2006) identified fluency as one of the critical components of an effective reading program. This new interest in reading fluency is due to research reports and summaries confirming the close connection between fluency and comprehension (McCormick & Zutell, 2011). Once automatic decoding and word recognition takes place, reading will become fluent. Fluent readers can then focus their attention on what the text means, instead of concentrating on decoding the words. Reading involves multi-tasking, which can only be done when one or more tasks have been learned so well that they require minimal effort (Taylor & Francis, 2011). Effective fluency allows the reader to focus on the main goal of reading, which is comprehension. Fluent readers have achieved the following skills: strategies for decoding unfamiliar words, a large number of sight words in their memory, and an understanding that comprehension is the purpose of reading (Jennings, Caldwell, & Lerner, 2010).

Why Students Struggle With Reading Fluency

Approximately forty percent of elementary school students are not fluent readers (Daane et al., as cited in Begeny, 2011). There are many reasons why students struggle with oral reading fluency. Many prerequisite skills and experiences are needed in order for adequate reading fluency to take place. Students struggling with reading fluency could be caused by poor decoding skills, a lack of practice with on-level text, lack of early literacy experiences, or poor attention or processing while reading.

One reason readers struggle with oral reading fluency is because they do not have an in-depth understanding of the alphabetic principle, which is the letter-sound decoding process. The alphabetic principle has been extensively researched and has been found to be a critical

component of fluent reading (Perfetti & Bolger, 2004 as cited in Cummings, Dewey, Latimer, & Good, 2011). The four phases of the alphabetic principle, developed by Ehri (2005), describe stages that children go through when learning to decode and identify words. The first stage is the pre-alphabetic phase, where students do not yet realize a relationship between letters and sounds in words. The second stage is the partial alphabetic stage, when students' use beginning and ending sounds to help with word identification but blending sounds together is not a developed skill. The third stage is the full alphabetic stage, when students begin to blend sounds together slowly and sight words are remembered. The fourth stage is the consolidated alphabetic stage, when students use spelling patterns, words they already know, and syllable patterns to figure out new words. Children's word knowledge will grow when they can make connections with known words and new words. The first two stages are appropriate during pre-school, kindergarten, and the beginning of first grade (Jennings et al., 2010). If older students are still in the first three stages of the alphabetic principle, they will struggle with reading fluency indicating that reading interventions should be put in place as soon as possible.

Another reason children struggle with reading fluency is that they have not had enough exposure and practice with reading material that is skill level appropriate. Sadly, many low-achieving readers do not like reading, they find it to be frustrating, and avoid reading as much as possible (Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols (2000) as cited in Jennings et al., 2010). When students feel this way about the reading process, they are not practicing reading as much as they should in order to become fluent. Reading fluency will only be accomplished through practice. "When texts are too difficult and long and accompanied with minimal differentiation of instruction and support, low-performing students are likely to attend to the text in a cursory manner and progress will be muted." (Taylor et al., 2011 p.3).

Lacking early literacy experiences before children enter school can contribute to poor reading fluency. Children who come to school having few books read to them are more limited and this may negatively impact their reading fluency later in life (Allington, 2006). During these early reading experiences, fluency can be modeled when adults read stories aloud. Also, during these early reading experiences, linguistic concepts can be discussed such as: what is a word, what is a sentence, what is a letter, and what sound does that letter make (McCormick et al., 2011). Lacking early literacy experience may cause children to struggle with the reading process and reading fluency during the elementary years.

Beginning readers and struggling readers have a difficult time juggling all of the components of the reading process. Lacking decoding skills can cause poor fluency, which then causes poor comprehension. Close attention needs to be paid to all of these areas at the same time. “The human mind has only limited ability to process information, and the need to process all the component tasks of reading is especially problematic for the beginning reader” (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002 p. 168). If students struggle with focusing and attention, the reading process will be difficult for them.

Types of Interventions

Interventions for improving reading fluency can be used with an entire class, a small group, or with individual students depending on what the needs of the student are and the resources available to the teacher. Students struggling with reading fluency should be identified as early as possible and interventions should begin immediately.

Repeated reading is an intervention that has been found to improve reading fluency. The National Institute for Literacy (2006) states that, “the best strategy for developing reading fluency is to provide your students with many opportunities to read the same passage orally

several times” (p. 23). When students reread the same passage several times, the goal of fluent reading is met when eighty-five words are read in one minute (Farstrup et al., 2002). The initial reading can be done with the teacher or a more experienced peer, so they can count the number of words read during the initial reading. Students can then practice rereading the same text by themselves or with peers. Next, the student reads out-loud again to the teacher or peer, so they can time and count the words read, hopefully showing improvement from the first reading. This information can be charted to increase the student’s motivation and they can visually see their own success. Research has proven that repeated oral reading increases fluency and most readers have shown improvement after four repeated readings (National Institute for Literacy, 2006).

Reader’s Theatre is another reading fluency intervention that involves repeated reading of text but, this time, students are practicing the text for the purpose of performing a reading for an audience. During Reader’s Theatre, students only read from a script, they do not have costumes, props, and they do not use body movements. Students are more engaged and motivated to participate in this repeated reading activity because they get to perform the reading to an audience (Jennings et al., 2009). This technique stresses the meaning and expression of the words, as opposed to reading for speed (Young & Rasinski, 2009).

One old but proven technique used to improve reading fluency is the Neurological Impress Method (NIM) developed and studied by Robert G. Heckelman in 1966 and again in 1969 (Heckelman, 1966, 1969 as cited in Feazell, 2004). NIM is when a teacher and a student will read a text on the student’s level together while using a finger to follow along under the words (Jennings et al., 2010). At first, the teacher reads louder and at a faster pace until the student gains confidence and takes over the role of the reader. The teacher still provides support when needed, so that reading can stay at a consistent fluency and meaning is not lost. The NIM can

also be provided to students through books read on audiotapes.

Reading fluency interventions do not always need to be done in a small group or on an individual basis; there are teaching techniques that can be used as a whole group to build fluency. In the past, students practiced oral reading in the classroom by round-robin reading or taking turns reading aloud. This has been found to be ineffective because only one student is practicing their oral reading fluency at a time. Other techniques have been proven to be more effective and allow all of the students to practice reading simultaneously. Echo reading is an example of a whole class reading fluency technique. During echo reading, the teacher reads a portion of the text and then the students chorally reread the same text. Partner reading is a whole class technique where students read with a partner providing assistance to each other along with way. Choral reading can also be used as a whole class technique where everyone chorally reads a short practiced passage together. Using a variety of these methods with the same text or basal reader throughout the week allows for extra repeated readings and oral reading practice time.

Conclusion

Research has proven that reading fluency is an essential part of the reading process. Fluent reading supports a student's ability to process and comprehend the text. When students are able to read fluently, reading becomes a more enjoyable task and motivation increases. Instruction in the area of reading fluency is needed for reading comprehension to take place. Elementary school teachers need to include reading fluency in their daily lessons, provide opportunities for students to practice reading, and provide interventions for students who are struggling.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there would be a statistically significant improvement in the oral reading performance (i.e. speed and reading rate) of students receiving Reader's Theatre instruction *in addition to* their regular instructional program.

Design

This study contained both a control group and a treatment group in order to better ascertain the true impact of Reader's Theatre instruction on students' oral reading fluency performance. The design of this study was quasi-experimental given that there was neither a random selection of students nor a random assignment of students to the treatment or the control group. Each group was chosen based on similar pretest oral reading fluency scores on the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Skills* (DIBELS) assessment, which was administered in January. The pre-test scores indicated that these students could potentially benefit from an oral reading fluency intervention. As indicated previously, the independent variable was the oral reading fluency intervention, Reader's Theatre. The treatment group received the oral reading fluency intervention, Reader's Theatre, for five weeks during small group instruction. The control group received normal small group reading instruction using only grade level books. Each group worked at a similar pace, meeting for small group instruction five days each week. Both groups were then given a post-test (i.e. the oral reading fluency portion of DIBELS) to determine the impact of the intervention.

Participants

The study took place in a Title I school in a low socio-economic neighborhood with a population of approximately 450 students. Ninety-five percent of the students attending the

school receive free or reduced lunch. All of the students live in close proximity to the school and no county buses are needed for student transportation. Mobility at the school is at 31%.

There were 20 first grade students, ages six to seven years old, in this study. The control group and the treatment group each contained ten students. Each group had two different first grade teachers, both highly qualified, with over eight years of teaching experience. The treatment group included five African American students, two Caucasian students, two Hispanic students, and one student with two or more races. There were six female students and four male students in the treatment group. The control group included four African American students, five Caucasian students, and one Hispanic student. There were four female students and six male students in the control group.

Instrument

The *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS) reading assessment is administered to elementary grade level students three times throughout the school year to determine their reading skills and growth. Oral reading fluency is a sub-test of the DIBELS assessment that begins in the middle of first grade with benchmark standards increasing through the years. During this assessment, students are timed for one minute while they read a grade-level appropriate text. After one minute the words that were read accurately by the student are counted to determine a score. For the purpose of this study, oral reading fluency was operationally defined as the number of words a student can read accurately from a grade level text in one minute. The goal for the end of first grade is to read 47 words in one minute.

Online reports can be found that prove the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is a valid and reliable assessment, especially when compared to other reading tests, such as the Woodcock-Johnson Reading Test (Spies & Plake, 2005). Fluent oral reading

consists of reading with automaticity and accuracy, which the DIBELS oral reading fluency subtest measures (Kuhn et al., 2010).

Procedure

In late January, the mid-year DIBELS oral reading fluency assessment was administered to all first grade students. This assessment was the pre-test for this study. Testing took place in the hallway outside of the classroom with minimal interruptions in the morning hours and was administered by a resource teacher in the school. After looking at the results, a control group and a treatment group were formed by comparing similar scores within two different classes. During the months of March and April, the five-week Reader's Theatre intervention was administered. In early May, the end of the year DIBELS oral reading fluency assessment was administered to all first grade students. This assessment was the post-test for this study. Testing again took place in the hallway outside of the classroom, with minimal interruptions, in the morning hours and was administered by a resource teacher in the school.

The Reader's Theatre intervention consisted of 10-15 minutes of small group reading instruction per day. On Mondays, a new first grade level Reader's Theatre script was presented to the students and the teacher read it out loud to them. After hearing the story, students were able to choose which speaking part they wanted. Students then highlighted all of their character's speaking parts on their copy of the script. The scripts were kept in the student's desks so they could practice reading them during independent reading time. For approximately 10 minutes on Tuesdays, students were called to the reading table with their Reader's Theatre scripts. Students read their character's part in order one time through with teacher guidance. Teacher guidance included pronunciation of words and voice inflection when certain punctuation was used. On Wednesdays and Thursdays of each week, students spent about 10 minutes

practicing their scripts again with less teacher support each day. On Fridays, the students would stand up in front of the class to read the script out loud to the whole class. The whole group of students took about 5-10 minutes to read the script before the class. The student's were excited to perform each week and the other students enjoyed being part of the audience. This process continued for four weeks, using different scripts each week.

The control group received regular small group instruction consisting of on-grade- level sets of books. The regular instruction was 10-15 minutes per day each day of the week. The on-grade-level books were read with the teacher multiple times to gain oral reading fluency skills. On Mondays, the students made predictions about the story before reading and during the reading. The book was read chorally one time with teacher assistance. On Tuesdays, the students chorally read the story again with less teacher support. On Wednesdays, the students read the story with a buddy, while the teacher monitored and provided minimal support. On Thursdays, the students whisper read the story independently, while the teacher listened in on students while they were reading. On Fridays, students read the story one-on-one to the teacher to assess fluency reading.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a significant difference in the achievement of oral reading fluency among first grade students who were instructed using the Reader's Theatre strategy compared to first graders receiving regular small group reading instruction. For the purpose of this study, achievement was based on the comparison of students' mid-year scores and end-of-year scores on oral reading fluency portion of the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Skills* (DIBELS). This study used a quasi-experimental research design because it consisted of an experimental group receiving the Reader's Theatre strategy and the control group receiving the regular small group reading instruction followed by an analysis of the pre-test and post-test data. The independent variable in this study was the Reader's Theatre intervention that the experimental group received and the dependent variable was the oral reading fluency portion of the DIBELS assessment.

Table I on the following page reports the pre-test versus post-test results for students receiving Reader's theatre instruction versus a similar group of students in a control group.

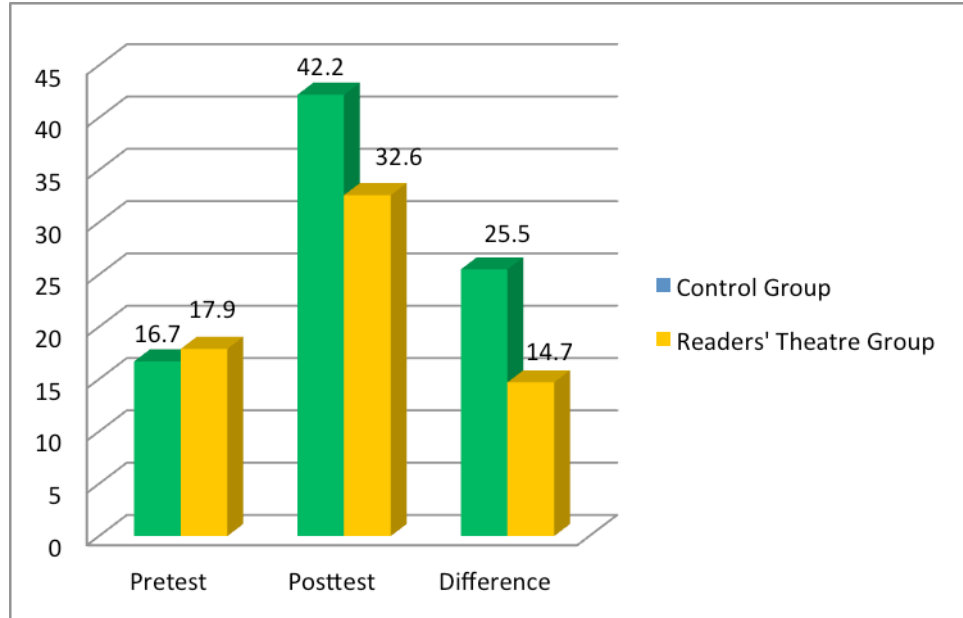
Table I

A Comparison of the Pretest and Posttest Oral Reading Fluency Performance of Students Who Received Reader's Theatre Instruction versus a Control Group

Groups	N	Pretest		Posttest		Pretest vs. Posttest Difference
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Reader's Theatre	10	17.9	5.5	32.6	15.1	14.7
Control Group	10	16.7	5.5	42.2	15.2	25.5

The above results suggest that while there was only a slight performance difference of 1.2 points on the pre-test for students receiving Readers' Theatre instruction versus students in the control group, there was a 9.6-point difference between the two groups on the post-test. A comparison of the pre-test versus post-test difference within both groups was even more substantial. A bar graph display of these results is reported in Figure A on the following page.

Figure A



The above results suggests that while both groups improved from the pre-test to the post-test administration of the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency assessment the amount of growth for students in the control group (i.e. 25.5 points) was substantially higher than that of students in the Readers' Theatre group (i.e. 14.7 points).

In order to determine whether this difference in the amount of growth from pre-test to post-test was statistically significant, a *t* test for independent groups procedure was used. As reported in Table I, a comparison of the pre-test versus post-test differences in performance between the students receiving Reader's Theatre instruction versus those in the control group was conducted. The results ($t = 2.193$, $df = 18$, $p = .043$) do suggest that the pre-test versus post-test differences in oral reading fluency between students receiving Readers' Theatre instruction versus the control group were statistically significant (i.e. the probability that they could occur by chance was less than five percent). Based upon these results, the null hypothesis that *the use of the Reader's Theatre strategy will not make a statistically significant difference in the oral reading fluency scores of first grade students* is rejected. It is important to note, however, that

there was no empirical evidence indicating that the oral reading fluency of students receiving Readers' Theatre instruction improved substantially when compared to students receiving the normal small group reading instruction.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Implications of Results

After considering many different types of oral reading fluency interventions, (examples of which were discussed in the literature review) this researcher chose to study the effect of the Reader's Theatre intervention with a group of first grade students. This intervention encouraged students to repeatedly read the same text along with the motivational incentive of performing their fluent reading in front of an audience. The null hypothesis for this study stated that *the use of the Reader's Theatre strategy will not make a statistically significant difference in the oral reading fluency scores of first grade students when their pre-test results on the oral reading fluency portion of the Dynamic Indicators of Early Learning Skills (DIBELS) assessment are compared with their post-test scores*. In this study, the results that are reported in Chapter IV indicate that both groups of students showed improvement in their oral reading fluency scores when comparing the pre-test results to the post-test results. The results of this study determined that the null hypothesis was rejected. The students receiving the regular small group reading instruction significantly out-performed the group receiving the Reader's Theatre intervention.

Threats to Validity

The first threat to the internal validity of the research was the background knowledge of students selected for this study. While the means of the pre-test result for both groups were similar in the area of oral reading fluency, this researcher felt that the reading prerequisite skills of each group were not compared in this study. These prerequisite skills include letter/sound identification, blending sounds together, and a strong knowledge of sight words. If the prerequisite reading skills are weak, oral reading fluency will not develop at the same pace.

The second threat to the internal validity of this study was the amount of additional reading instruction and practice students were receiving throughout the course of the instructional day. The first grade curriculum includes a whole group Open Court phonics program along with the Houghton Mifflin reading series, which was used to teach whole group reading comprehension skills. Although these programs were taught to both groups in the study, different teachers with different teaching styles delivered them. Students were assigned independent reading time in class as well as reading practice at home. The researcher was also not able to control the amount of reading practice at home. The small group instruction, which both the experimental group and the control group received, was not the only form of oral reading fluency practice.

The third threat to the internal validity of this study was the small sample size in each group of students. There were only ten students in both the experimental group and the control group. For a true experimental study, it is recommended that the sample size contain at least 30 participants for each group (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). If the sample size were larger it would better represent the first grade population of the county.

One external threat to the validity of this study was the low socio-economic status of students participating in this study. Ninety-five percent of the students participating in this study received free or reduced meals. With a larger and more randomly selected sample size, the results would better represent a population of first graders throughout the country thus making the results of the study more generalizable to the county-wide population of first graders.

Connection to the Literature

Despite the results of this study, similar studies have indicated strong improvement in students' oral reading fluency through the use of Reader's Theatre. A major difference between

this study and other studies was the number of students participating in the research, the grade level of the participants, and the amount of time the intervention was implemented. Young (2009) conducted his Reader's Theatre study with 29 students in his second grade classroom who showed remarkable progress when using this intervention throughout the course of an entire school year.

Implications for Future Research

The researcher suggests changes to ensure the internal and external validity of future research in the effectiveness of Reader's Theatre as an intervention to improve oral reading fluency. First, it would be important to examine both the initial oral reading fluency scores of the participants along with scores on prerequisite reading assessments in the area of phonics and word identification. Students selected for a study to improve oral reading fluency should also have similar ability levels in the areas of phonics, decoding, and sight word identification. Second, holding constant the other areas of reading instruction for the intervention and control group and the additional reading practice that takes place in the classroom or at home. Third, a larger sample size of participants would improve the validity of the study. Using a small group of students may leave results to chance. The selection of participants should also include a more diverse socio-economic representation of students. Finally, after reviewing previous research on the topic of Reader's Theatre, this intervention may work best in higher elementary grade levels such as second through fourth grade.

Conclusion

Although the research in this study did not strongly support the use of Reader's Theatre in a first grade classroom, it did show that improvement was made using this intervention. After reviewing the threats to validity, many improvements could be made for future research in the

area of oral reading fluency. The researcher has learned the importance of examining prerequisite reading skills when selecting groups for research. Future research and classroom instruction should continue in the area of oral reading fluency, as it is the foundation for independent reading comprehension.

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