

Running Head: THE EFFECTS OF IMPLEMENTING A READER'S THEATRE INTERVENTION IN
A FIRST GRADE CLASSROOM

The Effects of Implementing a Reader's Theatre Intervention in a First Grade Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to examine if using repeated readings of reader's theatre scripts will have an impact on first grade students' fluency ability. The study hypothesizes that using repeated readings of reader's theatre scripts will improve students reading rate (words per minute) and their ability to read fluently. A sample of six students was purposefully selected by the researcher from a first grade classroom in a central Illinois elementary school. The study lasted for four weeks. The student was measured using Rasinski's 3-Minute Reading Assessment, including the fluency and comprehension scale, and reading fluency assessments from Reading A to Z. The data revealed that a reader's theatre intervention can successfully improve first grade students reading rate and fluency when the text is at their reading level.

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The Effects of Implementing a Reader's Theatre Intervention in a First Grade Classroom

In the early elementary grades learning to read is one of the most important skills for a student to learn. "The consequences of poor achievement in literacy in the early years are pervasive, having detrimental effects on future school performance" (Therrien, Kirk, & Woods-Groves, 2012). Early intervention has been proven more effective in improving students reading ability long term. In early elementary grades, students are still learning to read. If interventions are delayed until upper elementary grades students are supposed to be reading to learn. Then, the student will fall behind in not only reading, but other content area subjects such as social studies or science.

Due to the upcoming implementation of Common Core standards, reading and math instruction have become the focus in most elementary classrooms. According to the National Reading Panel [NRP] (2000) there are five main components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Although fluency is critical to reading instruction it is often overlooked. "Fluent readers are able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. Fluency is one of several essential factors necessary for reading comprehension" (NRP, 2000). According to research, repeated readings and sustained silent readings are often used for fluency practice. Therefore repeated readings are usually accompanied by fluent reading assessments (Lo, Cooke, & Startling, 2011). Although reading rate is important for fluent reading, there are other skills necessary to become a fluent reader. A fluent reader is able to read with expression and volume, smoothness, and intonation. Studies show that repeated readings also improve accuracy, comprehension, and prosodic reading (Rasinski, 1990).

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The purpose of this study is to investigate a reader's theatre intervention in a first grade classroom with a group of struggling readers. The study was guided by two research questions. Does a reader's theatre intervention on first grade students have an impact on their reading rate (words per minute)? Also, does using a reader's theatre intervention on first grade students affect their ability to read fluently? The study hypothesizes that the implementation of a reader's theatre intervention, over a four week span, with first grade students will show gains in the student's fluency ability during repeated readings and increases words read correctly per minute.

Review of Literature

“The National Reading Panel (2002) highlighted the importance of five areas for comprehensive reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency” (Garrett & O'Connor, 2010). Fluency is an important component of reading. Fluency is considered being able to read with accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. In order for a student to be an accurate reader he or she must be able to read the words within the text without mispronunciation. Proficient readers demonstrate automaticity when they have the ability to read words accurately and without extensive effort. When readers read with automaticity they are able to concentrate on the meaning of the text rather than decoding specific words. Prosody refers to the readers' intonation while reading a passage aloud. The reader should use semantic and syntactic clues to determine the appropriate tone while reading (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Teachers test fluency using forms of oral reading, for example students are often tested for fluency using running records.

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Repeated Readings

Many studies have been conducted proving the effectiveness of repeated readings. In 1990, Timothy Rasinski conducted a study with third grade students that had positive results for the effectiveness of repeated readings, as well as listening while reading (Rasinski, 1990). Research suggests that repeated readings are an effective way to improve fluency and comprehension.

Modeling is also an effective method for improving fluency while reading. The student can listen to fluent reading and apply what they heard while they read orally. Reader's theatre provides opportunities for modeling when students read aloud in a group and are able to model fluent reading for each other. Then, high achieving students can assist lower achieving students by modeling how to read aloud fluently. During modeling students participate in listening while reading silently. In this method, students follow along and read the text as it is being read aloud to them. Studies show that using repeated readings and listening while reading methods simultaneously may be more effective than using repeated readings alone. This method can be used one-on-one with a student and instructor or with a larger group.

On the other hand not all literature agrees with the effectiveness of repeated readings. Research suggests that repeated readings only help improve non-transfer passages (passages previously rehearsed by students) and not transfer passages (passages that are new to the student) (Lo, Cooke, & Starling, 2011). More research would be useful in determining the effectiveness of repeated readings on transfer passages. Although repeated readings have been proven to be effective on their own, students need an activity that will keep them engaged and motivate them to improve.

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Reader's Theatre Overview

Despite the effectiveness of repeated readings, students need an authentic purpose for repeated readings or they will not be engaged in the learning. If students feel they have a legitimate purpose they will learn more and be more focused on the activity. Reader's theatre provides an authentic purpose for repeated readings. Students need repeated practice of the readings in order to prepare for being in front of an audience. Additionally, reader's theatre provides a social aspect for students to interact with one another. These factors keep students engaged and interested in the lesson (Vasinda & McLeod, 2011).

Reader's theatre can be implemented in a variety of different ways. All students are given a specific role to play based on a script. Students are given the scripts a few days in advance and are expected to read and reread their part. Eventually the group reads the script together and puts on a performance (Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009). The teacher also assists students with reading by listening to students practicing and offering advice and critiques. Reader's theatre is a voice only performance. The readers must use their voice to bring the story to life, instead of costumes, sets, and stage drama.

Reader's theatre improves comprehension as well as fluency, because in order for a reader to portray the correct emotions he or she must understand the characters background and emotions, as well as the plot of the story. The purpose for reading with expression is so the audience can visualize the story (Vasinda & McLeod, 2011). Reader's theatre can be used to connect oral reading, drama, important literature. Students become invested on their readings, because they can add their thoughts and emotions into the readings. Not only does this help engage students, but it also improves students' comprehension. In order to effectively read

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passages students must consider plot, setting, character motives, and character relationships.

These aspects create a deeper understanding of the text (Garrett & O' Connor, 2010).

Reader's theatre can be used with a variety of texts. Fiction is often used within scripts, but non-fiction texts can be used as well. Additionally, content area readings can be turned into reader's theatre scripts. Content area reader's theatre scripts are especially useful for middle school aged students. Students at this age are beginning to read to learn as opposed to learning to read. Using content area readings for scripts is a form of curriculum based reader's theatre. Curriculum based reader's theatre takes curriculum content and forms it into scripts. Students can work with one another to create their own scripts from fiction or non-fiction texts. This gives students a deeper understanding of complex material. Furthermore, it will help students better understand content area vocabulary. Students must gain a deeper understanding of the vocabulary words in order to implement them into their scripts (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009). Reader's theatre can help a variety of students as well. English Language Learners can benefit from reader's theatre the same way struggling readers do (Young & Rasinski, 2009).

Reader's Theatre Implementation

Reader's theatre can be implemented in a variety of ways. Many studies have been conducted to prove the various ways reader's theatre can be implemented in the classroom. Young and Rasinski (2009) targeted fluency by implementing reader's theatre in a second grade classroom in a northern suburb of Dallas. Reader's theatre was used integrated within a balanced literacy program. It was used every day, instead of just on special occasions or holidays. Reader's theatre began the second week of school and continued until the last day. Every week followed the same format. Ninety minutes were spent on reading each day. On Mondays the script would be introduced within a mini-lesson which lasted approximately 25 minutes. Mini-

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lessons were presented Tuesday through Thursday using various texts. On these days, students spent 5-10 minutes practicing their reader's theatre script. As students became more comfortable with the process they were given less time to rehearse. On Fridays students performed their scripts. Performance time lasted about 5-15 minutes depending on the length of the script.

Garrett and O'Connor (2010) studied four different classrooms in a rural southeastern school district. Each classroom was a special education classroom and implemented reader's theatre in a variety of ways. The first classroom was a kindergarten inclusive classroom. In this class, the special education teacher worked with seven students in the classroom who were diagnosed with a learning disability. Reader's theatre was used as an enrichment activity throughout the year. When reader's theatre was first implemented students read the scripts chorally spilt into groups by gender. As the year progressed students were assigned their own parts. Similarly to the study conducted by Young and Rasinski (2009) students were introduced to the text on Monday, given approximately 10 minutes a day to practice Tuesday through Thursday, and performed on Fridays. In this classroom, the group of seven students performed in front of the rest of their class or in front of other classes in the school. Young and Rasinski (2009) had positive results in word recognition accuracy, automaticity, prosody, and DRA level. Although reading rate was not a main goal of the study the students had an average growth rate of 64.9 words counted per minute while reading. Students also had an average 0.8 growth in prosody on a four point scale. There were also qualitative results as well as the quantitative data. Students were motivated for lessons and enjoyed performing in front of their peers. Students were engaged throughout the activities.

The study by Garrett and O'Connor (2010) was conducted in a self-contained/extended resource classroom. The students ranged from grades three through fifth. In this classroom,

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reader's theatre was primarily used to study content area subjects. This classroom followed a similar procedure to the previously mentioned classroom. An exception is this classroom implemented props when appropriate to the story. Some of the props included: hats, capes, torches, etc. The teacher in this classroom incorporated reader's theatre on a weekly basis. Another class within the study was also a self-contained/extended resource classroom, but in this classroom the teacher chose to only use reader's theatre with a small group of five struggling readers. The five students the teacher used were classified as self-contained in her classroom. She usually split this group into two small groups. The last classroom within this study was a class of six students (three first-graders, two second-graders, and one third-grader). All of these students had a reading based learning disability. Students would rotate between reading the script and watching the other group perform. Additionally, the students used motions to go along with the script. Based on the four classrooms used in the study by Garrett and O'Connor (2010) all students made progress in reading. Specifically, the students showed improvement in letter recognition, text levels, fluency, and comprehension. On average the students improved text level by eight levels. The students' improvement cannot be solely related to work with reader's theatre. According to the district's averages, students without disabilities typically moved 10 to 12 levels in one academic year.

In Clark et al. (2009) three fourth grade students were studied during an eight week intervention. The students had a daily schedule that began with five minutes of either reader's theatre or another form of a warm-up. Then, the whole class was given a mini-lesson for approximately 15 minutes. Next, students would read a book on their own for 30 minutes followed by discussion of these books in groups for 10 minutes. Last the class would share for five minutes. This study followed a similar format to the previously mention studies. On

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Monday students were assigned parts for a new reader's theatre script. Tuesday students practiced their parts aloud for five minutes using whisper voices. In "warm-up" time on Wednesday through Friday students would rehearse their parts with a partner. In "discussion time" on Wednesday and Thursday students would have a "dress rehearsal" and rehearse their part with another student who had the same part. During "discussion time" on Friday the students would perform. Additionally, students would make lists of difficult words within their scripts. During the week, the teacher would help students with the meaning of these words and pronunciation. Also, the teacher would teach mini-lessons based on fluent reading.

Furthermore, each part of the script was a different reading level. This allowed students of all reading levels to work collaboratively. In Clark et al. (2009) the three cases studies showed a variety of results. One student showed no significant improvement during the study, another started with strong accuracy while reading and showed considerable improvement and the last student began with lower reading accuracy and showed improvement throughout the study. All of the students showed a decline in improvement by the end of the study. The decline may be due to the increase in the level of the students' texts in week five.

The previous studies showed traditional implementations of Reader's Theatre. There have been studies to show extensions from the traditional Reader's Theatre approach. Vasinda and McLeod (2011) did a study matching podcasting with Reader's Theatre. Their study lasted 10-weeks. The classes followed a similar reader's theatre weekly format used in previously mentioned studies, but on Fridays students recorded the plays and it was saved using an mp3 file. Through interviews the researchers found that students and teachers felt that repeated readings and reader's theatre helped improved the students' ability to read with expression. Students felt satisfied and challenged during reader's theatre and felt it gave them an authentic purpose for

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repeated readings. Teachers believed reader's theatre was easily implemented into their classroom routines. Rozansky and Aagesen (2010) extended reader's theatre and implemented image theatre for their study to improve critical literacy. The study was done with two eighth grade low level reading classes. The study was conducted over three 90 minute class periods. The students would read specifically chosen text and act out the scene visually after discussing the meaning of the text. Image theatre was used as a way for students to express their critical thinking. Further research is needed to test the effects of image theatre.

According to the research repeated reading is an effective way to improve students' fluency. Students need an authentic reason for repeated readings. Reader's theatre is on way that students can practice repeated reading with an authentic purpose. Some studies had mixed quantitative results on the effectiveness of reader's theatre. Most of the studies showed similar qualitative results. Students enjoyed reader's theatre and it helped boost their confidence in reading. Teachers found that reader's theatre was easily implemented into their weekly reading routines. Overall, positive results were seen after implementing reader's theatre.

Method

Instruments

For this study, two instruments were used including Rasinski's 3-Minute Reading Assessment and fluency assessments from Reading A to Z. Both instruments were used to test words read correctly per minute. Rasinski's 3-Minute Reading Assessment was also used to test student's comprehension, and ability to read fluently on a fluency scale.

Rasinski's 3 minute reading assessment. Rasinski's 3-Minute Reading Assessment (Rasinski & Padak, 2005) has three components: words correct per minute (see appendix A), a fluency scale (see appendix B) and a comprehension scale (see appendix C). The assessment is

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divided by grade level and each grade level includes forms A, B, C, and D. Each form is a different passage at the same reading level. This study used first grade passages forms A, B, C, and D.

Rasinski's 3 Minute Reading Assessment was used to test students' wcpm, ability to read fluently (using the fluency scale), and comprehension (using the comprehension scale). Fluent reading was tested using a scale was on the student's expression and volume, phrasing and intonation, smoothness, and pace. Each section is graded on a one to four scale, with one being the least proficient and four being the most proficient. There was a total of 16 points possible on the fluency scale. Comprehension was tested using a Rasinski's comprehension scale. The scale ranges from one to six, with six being the best possible score.

Reading A to Z. This instrument is an online resource that can be used by teachers or parents. It was created in January 2002 and has won the Parents' Choice Recommended Award, a Global Learning Initiative Award, and a Teachers' Choice Award. ReadingAtoZ.com provides variety of reading resources. Some resources include resources for fluency instruction, such as fluency assessment passages, reader's theatre scripts, and helpful hints for implementing reader's theatre in the classroom. This study used the first grade reading passages F, G, H, and I (see appendix D). Although forms F through J are all first grade passages, the reading level difficulty increases with each letter.

Data Source. The reader's theatre scripts were all chosen from the online resource Reading A to Z. Four of the scripts were level E and one script was a level H (see appendix E). First grade texts range from D through J, but the reading level increases with each letter.

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Sample

The researcher administered the Rasinski 3-Minute Assessment to students in one first grade classroom in an elementary school in central Illinois. There were 22 students in the class, including 12 male students and 10 female students. The researcher tested each student on words correct per minute (wcpm), a fluency scale, and a comprehension scale. One student was omitted from the study, because he was pulled out for an intervention during the time the study took place. Six students were selected for the study, because they scored the lowest in two out of the three categories (wcpm, fluency scale, and comprehension scale). The names of the students were coded to protect confidentiality. Each student was assigned a letter as an identification to be used to collect data. Students A, B, C, D, and E were females and student F was a male. Students A and D received Title II intervention during the day, along with the reader's theatre intervention. Student B was removed from the study during the final week, because she began special education services, which took place during the time of the reader's theatre intervention.

Procedure

The researcher administered Rasinski's 3 Minute Assessment to each student once a week. While the student was reading, the researcher was following along marking any miscues made by the student. The researcher counted the words the student read during the minute and subtracted any words read incorrectly. This number is the student's words correct per minute (wcpm). Also while the student was reading the administrator was grading the student on a fluency scale. The scale was based on the student's expression and volume, phrasing and intonation, smoothness, and pace. Each section is graded on a one to four scale, with one being the least proficient and four being the most proficient. There was a total of 16 points possible on the fluency scale.

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After the student finished reading for one minute the researcher continued reading aloud the rest of the passage while the student listened. When the researcher was finished reading the passage aloud, the administrator asked the student to give a retelling of the passage. The student was then graded on a comprehension scale. The scale ranged from one to six. If a student earned a one, they could not recall the passage or could only recall a fact or two. If a student earned a six, they were able to give a detailed story including the main idea and the events were listed in a logical order. Additionally, after the retelling the student was able to make a personal connection to the text.

The researcher also administered a fluency assessment from Reading A to Z to each student once every week. The researcher asked the student to read the passage aloud for one minute. While the student was reading the researcher marked any miscues made by the student. After the minute was over the researcher counted all the words read aloud by the student, but subtracted any words read incorrectly. The final number was the student's wcpm. After the student finished reading the researcher completed reading the passage aloud while the student listened. The following figure is the schedule for testing and repeated readings each week. The figure shows that a new reader's theatre script was introduced each week. Every day the group read the script chorally before students read their individual parts. The students were given tasks to complete while the researcher assessed students one on one using Rasinski's 3-Minute Reading Assessment and Reading A to Z fluency assessments.

Day One	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New script was introduced • The group read the script chorally • Students were assigned roles • The group read the script again and the students read their specific parts • Students highlighted their lines in the script, while the researcher tested students A and B
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Day Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The group reviewed the plot of the script • The group read the script chorally • The group read the script again and the students read their specific parts • Students worked on graphic organizers, while the researcher tested students C and D
Day Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The group reviewed the plot of the script • The group read the script chorally • The group read the script again and the students read their specific parts • Students completed sentences based on the script while the researcher tested students E and F
Day Four	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The group reviewed the plot of the script • The group read the script chorally • The group read the script again and the students read their specific parts • The students practiced reading their part aloud to a partner while the researcher tested any students that missed testing during the week • The group read through the script one last time

Figure 1. Weekly Schedule for Reader's Theatre Intervention

Data Analysis

Data from Rasinski's fluency and comprehension scales were analyzed descriptively to find students' ability to read fluently and comprehend the text. Rasinski's fluency scale score is derived from four components: expression and volume, phrasing and intonation, smoothness, and pace. Students are graded in each category on a scale of one to four. One is the lowest score a student can receive in each category and four is the highest. The score from each category was added together for the student's total fluency score. The highest score a student could have received on Rasinski's fluency scale was 16. Rasinski's comprehension scale is from one to six. One being the lowest score a student can receive and six being the highest. Both Rasinski's 3-Minute Assessment and Reading A to Z used fluency passages to test words read correctly per minute (wcpm). The data was analyzed descriptively to show students' improvement throughout the study.

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Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of a reader's theatre intervention on first grade students words correct per minute (wcpm) and ability to read fluently. In order to test student's wcpm the researcher used Rasinski's 3-Minute Reading Assessment and Reading A to Z's fluency passages. Overall, students' wcpm increased on Rasinski's 3-Minute Assessment (see figure 2). On the other hand students' scores decreased on Reading A to Z fluency assessments (see figure 3).

The students were also tested for fluent reading using Rasinski's fluency scale in Rasinski's 3-Minute Reading Assessment. Students A, B, C, D, and E improved their fluency score from the pre-intervention test to the final test in week four. Student F improved his score in week one, but then his score dropped in week two. By week four student F earned the same score he earned in the pre-intervention test (see figure 4).

The students were additionally tested for comprehension of the fluency passages using the comprehension scale in Rasinski's 3-Minute Assessment. It is important to test for comprehension in order to ensure students comprehend what they learned and not just reading the words in the page. Students A, B, C, and E improved their comprehension score from the pre-intervention test to the last test during the fourth week. Students D and F's scores decreased from the pre-intervention test to the last test during the fourth week. Student D showed an improvement of two points from week two to three, but dropped two points in week four. Student F dropped three points from the pre-intervention week to the first week, improved one point from week two to week three, and maintained his score from week three to week four (see figure 5).

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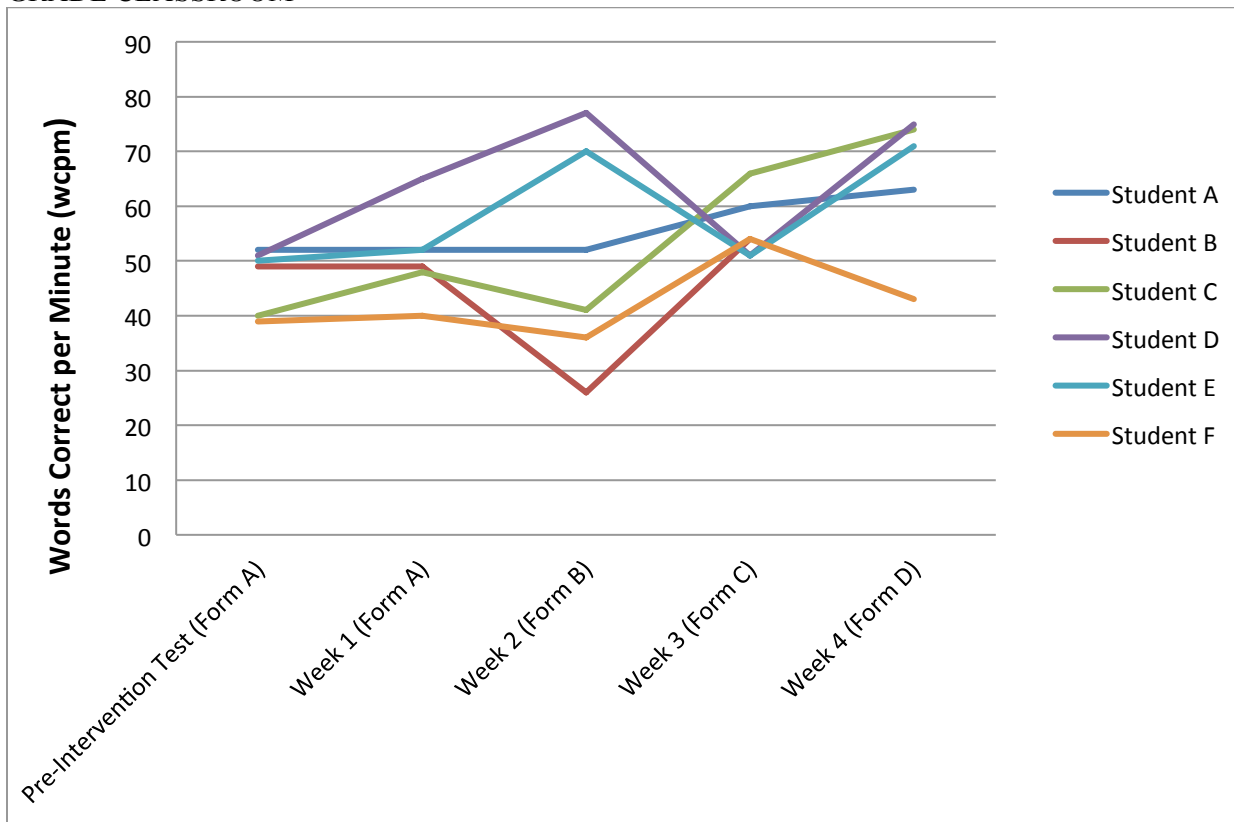


Figure 2. Rasinski’s 3-Minute Reading Assessment testing words correct per minute (wcpm)

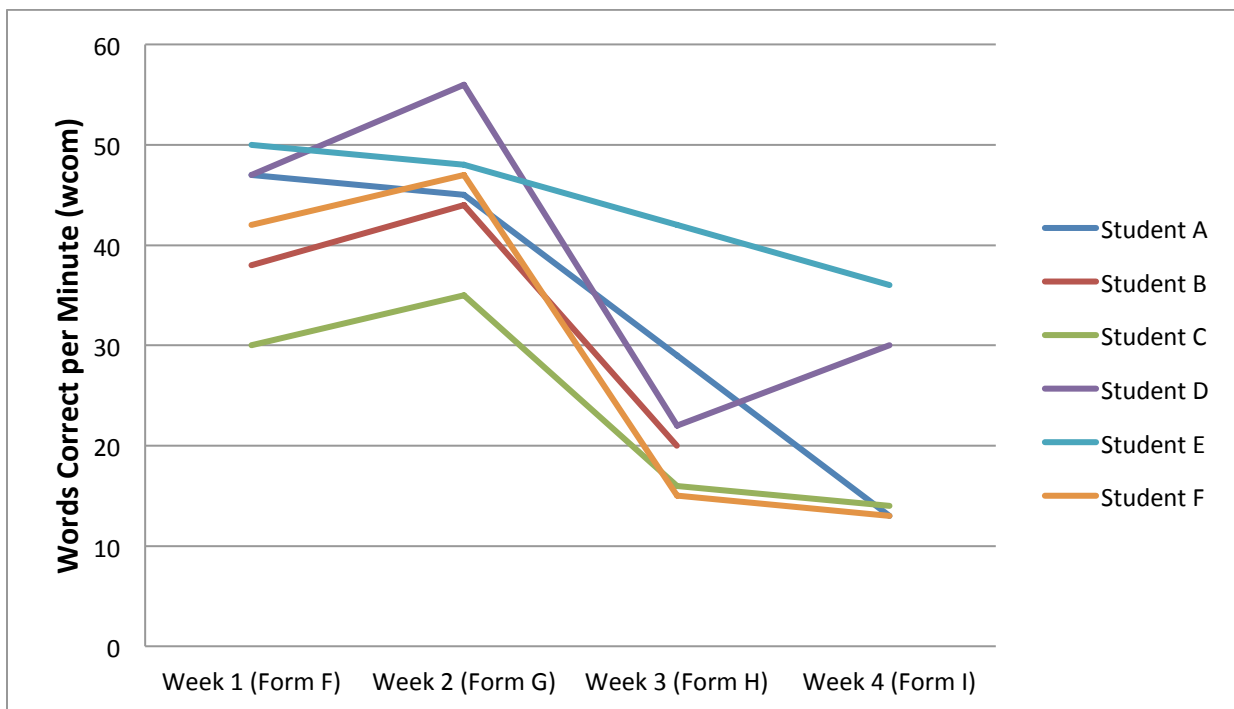


Figure 3. Reading A to Z’s fluency passages testing words correct per minute (wcpm).

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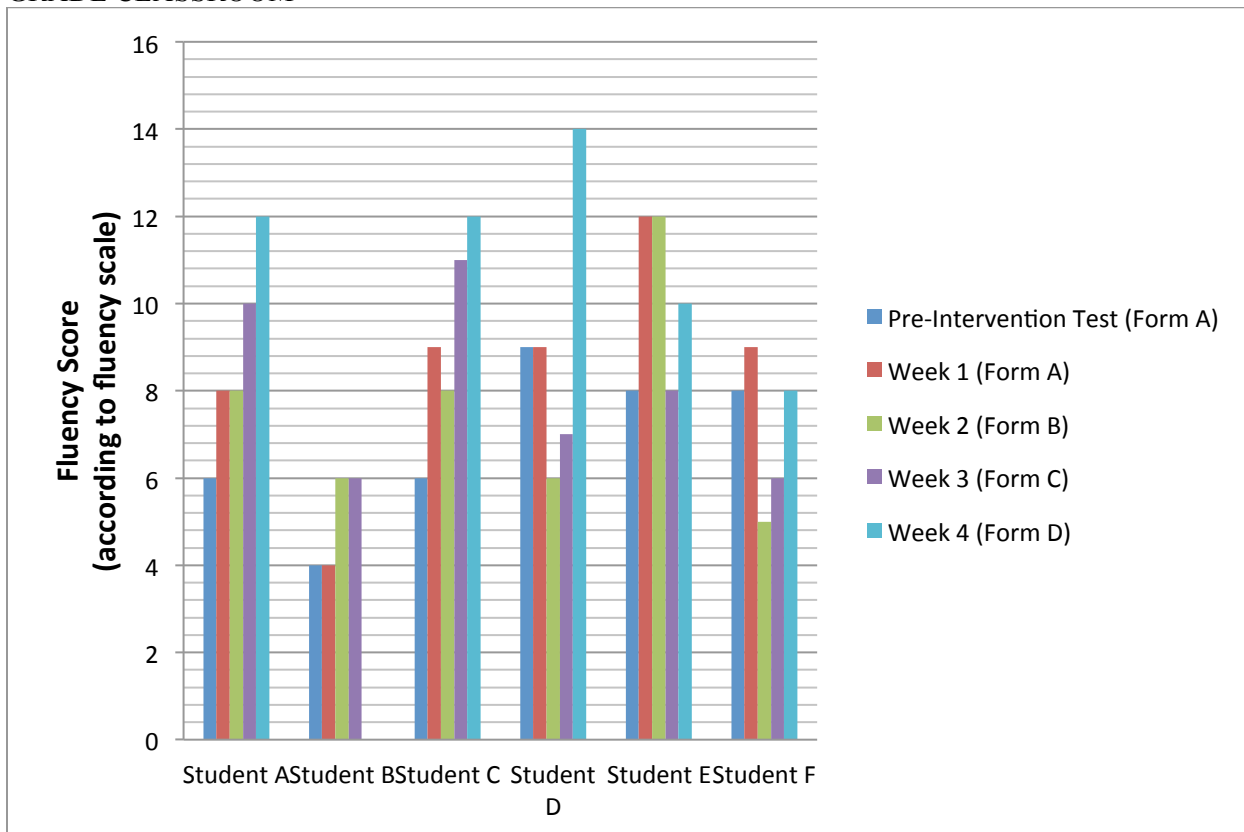


Figure 4. Rasinski’s 3-Minute Assessment testing fluent reading using the fluency scale

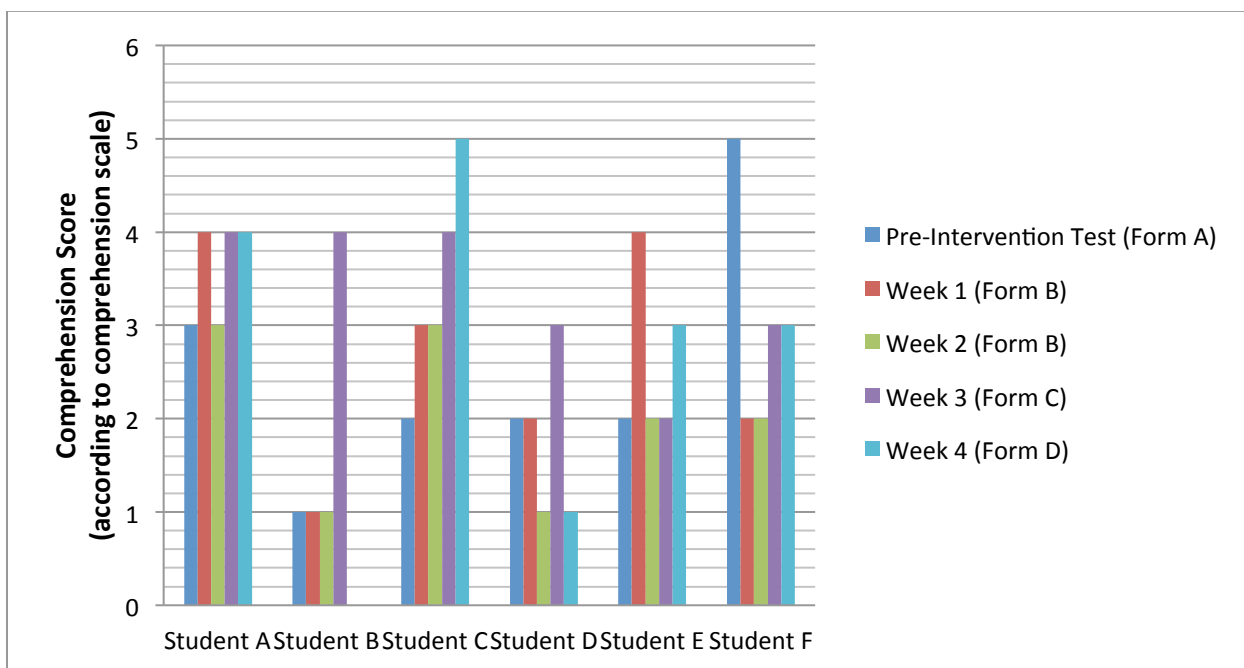


Figure 5. Rasinski’s 3-Minute Assessment testing comprehension using comprehension scale

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Discussion. This study revealed that using reader's theatre intervention in first grade appeared to improve students' wcpm when students continued to work with text at the same reading level. Student C showed the greatest improvement by increasing her wcpm by 34 words. Student F had the smallest improvement by improving his wcpm by four words. All students improved their wcpm on the Rasinski's 3-Minute Assessment. On the other hand, the study showed that a reader's theatre intervention does not improve wcpm when the reading level of the text increases throughout the study. Student A showed the largest decrease in wcpm by decreasing her wcpm by 34 words and student E showed the smallest decrease by decreasing her wcpm by 14 words. All students decreased their wcpm on the Reading A to Z fluency assessments.

A reader's theatre intervention does appear to improve fluent reading in first grade students. Students A, B, C, D, and E improved their fluency score. Students A and C showed the greatest improvement by improving by six points from the pre-intervention test until week four. Student F did not improve his final score, but scored the same in week four as the pre-intervention test. Students A, B, C, and E improved their comprehension score from the pre-intervention test to their final test in week four, or week three for student B. Student D improved in week three, but dropped a point below her score on her pre-intervention test. Student F scored a five on the pre-intervention test, but dropped to a three in the last test during week four. Students B and C showed the most improvement. Student B increased her score by three points from the pre-intervention test to week three. Student C increased her score by three points from the pre-intervention test to the final test in week four.

The study showed that implementing a reader's theatre intervention in a first grade classroom does help students improve their reading rate when tests remain at the same reading

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level throughout the study. Furthermore, the study reveals that a reader's theatre intervention does improve fluent reading with first grade students.

There were two limitations to this study. First, the researcher was not the classroom teacher; therefore the researcher did not know the students as well as their own teacher would have. Second, since this was an intervention it is difficult to tell whether the improved wcpm was due to the reader's theatre aspect of the intervention or just the extra intervention itself. The students may have improved because of the reader's theatre lessons, the one-on-one attention, or both.

Implication. For teachers, this means that a reader's theatre intervention is beneficial for first grade students to improve reading rate and fluency, when the text remains at the same reading level. For a researcher, this may provide a new area for study. Another study could test the benefits of a reader's theatre intervention in which the texts and assessments remain at the student's instructional reading level throughout the lesson.

Action Plan. As the researcher for this project, I do not have my own classroom yet. In my future classroom, I would like to implement reader's theatre into readers' workshop. Students would be split into groups by instructional reading level and they would work with texts at their instructional reading level. Additionally, I would be able to spend more time working with students on comprehension while reading. I would be able to give the students prior knowledge on the subject of the text and see how the prior knowledge improves their comprehension. Then, I would progress monitor students on reading level, fluency, and comprehension. Students could change groups throughout the year based on reading level and I could teach mini lessons to the whole class on various aspects of fluent reading and comprehension.

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I believe the reader's theatre intervention was effective with the six students I worked with, but I also believe that reader's theatre could be effective with all students as long as they are working with and being tested on text that is at their instructional reading level. Although, comprehension was not one of my research questions I would like to focus on improving comprehension along with reading rate and fluency in my future classroom. Although reading fluently is important, students need to be able to read to gain and recall knowledge.

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