

Arts for Academic Achievement

A Brief Review of Research on Readers' Theatre and Tableau in Literacy Instruction

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Submitted by

Jennifer R. Willcutt, M.A.



CENTER FOR
APPLIED RESEARCH AND
EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

This review of the literature seeks to identify and summarize scientific research on the use and effectiveness of Readers' Theatre and Tableau in literacy education. These programs integrate theatre activities into the classroom and are intended to enhance literacy skills. This review will also define key terms, address the use of drama techniques in the context of current standards- and evidence-based educational practices and policies, including Reading First, and discuss the nature of the relationship between the use of drama techniques in the classroom and literacy achievement.

Drama Techniques in Reading Instruction

Under the federal mandates of No Child Left Behind's annual yearly progress requirements and the Reading First literacy initiative, teachers are looking for classroom activities to improve children's reading skills that are evidence-based, are motivating for students, and that will reach all students, regardless of cultural background or reading skill level. Readers' Theatre and Tableau are activities that have been borrowed from the field of drama as alternative instructional activities that can engage students in reading by encouraging them to use their bodies and voices as part of communicating text to an audience. In the process, students are getting valuable reading practice, repeatedly reading their text in order to prepare for a performance (in the case of Readers' Theatre), or they are making their reading comprehension concrete by using their bodies to form a pose of an action that is occurring in the text (as with Tableau). Instead of keeping students still in their seats, reading to the teacher, as in traditional reading instruction, the incorporation of drama into reading instruction allows students to use their bodies and their voices to interpret and communicate their version of the text. The broader array of modes of communication provides students more opportunities to use their imaginations to engage in the story. It also

allows students to perform in front of others, which intrinsically motivates students to do their best reading and show their peers their capabilities. Students who are reluctant to read aloud can become the “star of the show” or use skills that they ordinarily would not be able to share during other reading activities. From the teacher’s perspective, these activities are versatile and can be used as part of another reading activity or as the entire reading activity, depending on the teacher’s instructional goals. The purpose of this literature review is to provide background information about the use of two drama activities – Readers’ Theatre and Tableau -- in reading instruction. This review defines each technique and examines the state of the research literature on each with respect to their effects on student literacy achievement in specific skill areas such as reading fluency, reading comprehension, and oral language.

Tableau

Tableau, also referred to as Freeze Frame, is a dramatic technique in which actors strike a pose that conveys meaning to an audience. In other words, the actors freeze in place and create a snapshot of a moment in a story. Tableau is similar to pantomime in that the actors do not speak, but it is different from miming in that, once posed, the actors are like statuesque figures in a picture and they do not move or gesture. This technique is easily inserted into instruction because at any point during a story reading a teacher may ask students to interpret the action in the story by striking a pose, or demonstrating their understanding of plot by creating three tableaux: one of the beginning, one of the middle, and one of the end of the story. Tableau is a very versatile technique because it allows students to use their bodies to demonstrate understanding of ideas as opposed to trying to verbally explain their ideas to the teacher. In other words, Tableau is an alternative option

for expressing understanding which can be especially helpful for students whose oral language skills are limited. An important dimension of Tableau is the coaching done by the instructor. The teacher engages the students in the story by facilitating discussion about the plot developments and the characters and their motivations.

The use of this drama technique represents an innovation in reading instruction. A research literature base linking the use of Tableau per se to improved reading achievement is nonexistent at this time. The use of Tableau to increase reading comprehension is theoretically compelling, however, based on other areas of reading research that involve tapping students' kinesthetic modality or teaching students how to anticipate what might happen next as they read a story. In this case, the lack of research on the effect of Tableau on literacy skill makes this area an exciting opportunity for further investigation. Possible effects of this technique on students' reading achievement include improved reading comprehension; specifically, how students come to understand that a story has a "story grammar" – in other words, that a story has a beginning or introduction, such as "Once upon a time" or provides a setting for where the story will take place, a middle or a problem or conflict, and an end, or the resolution of a conflict. Tableau has been used in classrooms to demonstrate story grammar for students and represents a promising area for further reading instruction research.

Readers' Theatre

Readers' Theatre is the term that is used to describe a form of dramatic reading in which a play, narrative, or dramatic piece of work designed to entertain, inform or influence is performed for an audience. The activity was developed after World War II from the combination of the fields of conventional theater and oral storytelling (Adams, 2003).

Readers' Theatre is different from a fully-staged play in that readers read aloud a text that has been modified to a script. In a Readers' Theatre performance, actors are expected to rely on their scripts without memorizing their lines, yet they must also read fluently with expression in order to convey meaning and artistic interpretation to the audience. Readers may sit or stand during reading, and there may be a few costume pieces, such as hats, props, and scenery or accessories, such as painted canvas or signs. Usually there is a narrator that provides the cementing details and explanations of what is happening in the text (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999). Readers' Theatre also gives students an authentic reason to do repeated readings of text, since they are rehearsing for a performance. Typically the reading material for Readers' Theatre includes plays or poems but may also be material read directly from textbooks (Samuels, 2006). During Readers' Theatre actions are implied during reading but are not explicitly performed. For example, some characters in the row may stand with their backs to the audience, indicating that they are not on stage until their part comes into play, at which time they turn to the audience to speak (Moran, 2006). As with Tableau, the teacher serves as a coach in getting students to think and talk about the characters and their experiences.

Readers' Theatre contributes to literacy achievement primarily by developing students' reading fluency skills. Reading fluency is a complex reading skill which is defined as the ability to decode and comprehend text simultaneously. Fluency has several indicators including rate or speed of reading in words per minute (Chomsky, 1976; Deno, S.L., 1985; Hasbrouck & Tindal, 1992), decoding accuracy (Samuels, 2006), and expressive reading with appropriate inflection (Schreiber, 1980; Dowhower, 1987; Herman, 1985). Fluency is one of a set of five reading skills that comprise the "Big Five" reading skills identified by the National Reading Panel as necessary components of effective, evidence-based reading

instruction. The other four skills are phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension (NICHD, 2000). Reading fluency is an important reading skill because it facilitates comprehension. Readers who struggle with decoding are not able to process words as whole units and therefore their text comprehension is impeded. Readers who can identify words quickly will be able to direct their attention to understanding the meaning of the text.

Because of its use of text and the opportunity to practice repeated reading of a text, students develop their reading fluency skills in Readers' Theatre in an appealing way that incorporates the practice necessary to build skill. Students read with increasing speed, accuracy, comprehension and expression the more they practice the text. Repeated reading builds fluency by increasing familiarity with the words in a text, while simultaneously strengthening automaticity, or the cognitive ability to process words automatically with less and less effort (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Samuels, 1979). Readers' Theatre is well-represented in the research literature as an enjoyable repeated reading instruction strategy, especially with regard to developing reading fluency with all students (Keehn, 2003; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Rinehart, 1999; Tyler & Chard, 2000).

This review of the Readers' Theatre literature focused on six studies that were chosen because of their similarity to the way Readers' Theatre was implemented in the AAA program. Three studies were found that have attempted to establish a causal link between the use of Readers' Theatre and developing reading fluency and/or increasing student reading achievement by using an experimental or quasi-experimental design and random sampling or random assignment to groups. Three studies employed random assignment of classrooms to control or experimental conditions (Keehn, 2003; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker,

1998/1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999), and two of them offered both quantitative and qualitative results of student reading achievement in fluency, comprehension, or reading ability (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999). All three of the quantitative studies produced some statistically significant gains in areas such as reading rate, story retelling, reading expression, phrasing or fluidity, and reading comprehension. These articles varied in the ways they addressed the relationship between Readers' Theatre and literacy and implemented an intervention, but all of them produced statistically significant results with student fluency skills. Three additional descriptive articles are included in the literature review in order to more fully describe the elements of an effective Readers' Theatre implementation: one action research article about the experiences classroom teachers have with their Readers' Theatre program (Rinehart, 1999) and two descriptive or theoretical articles (Moran, 2006; Tyler & Chard, 2000) that describe the variety of instructional benefits that Readers' Theatre provides. All of the selected articles were read and analyzed for information concerning the adopted operational definitions of Readers' Theatre, research questions that address the relationship of Readers' Theatre to literacy skill improvement, the length and nature of the intervention, the research subjects' demographic information, research methodology and design, and the results of the research, both quantitative and qualitative (See Table 1).

Conclusion

Evidence from qualitative, experimental, and quasi-experimental studies suggests that drama techniques can be implemented in classrooms to enhance literacy instruction, and, in turn, students' literacy skills. The use of Tableau to increase reading comprehension is theoretically compelling; however, the research base on tableau's use in reading instruction

does not yet exist and therefore represents an exciting new opportunity. Most of the research on drama in reading has focused on Readers' Theatre. Readers' Theatre has been linked to students' increased literacy achievement by increasing fluency skills by several experimental studies (Keehn, 2003; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999). Since fluency is a reading skill that has been identified by the National Reading Panel as one of the five skills necessary for reading achievement, Readers' Theatre is another tool that teachers can confidently add to their repertoire. Together, Tableau and Readers' Theatre represent exciting ways that theatre arts can be successfully incorporated in classrooms to enhance reading skills.

Table 1. Readers' Theatre Research Articles

| Title | Readers' Theatre Definition | Research Questions | Program Length | Design | Results |
|--|---|---|--|---|---|
| <p>The Effect of Instruction and Practice through Readers' Theatre on Young Readers' Oral Reading Fluency (Keehn, 2003)</p> | <p>“An interpretative activity in which students repeatedly read a script based on a story in preparation for an oral reading performance, as a vehicle for oral reading practice (cf. Busching, 1981; Edmiston & King, 1987; Forsythe, 1995; Sloyer, 1982; Winegarden, 1978; Young, 1991)” p. 43</p> | <p>1. What is the effect of rereading, modeling, and use of appropriate text via RT on second graders' oral reading fluency? 2. Does explicit instruction in fluency add to students' growth in oral reading fluency (beyond growth accounted for by rereading, modeling, and use of appropriate texts)? 3. Does fluency instruction increase the oral reading fluency and the reading comprehension scores of students at different levels of reading skill in different ways?</p> | <p>9 weeks of RT in all 4 classrooms; 2 classrooms RT + mini lessons and daily fluency coaching 12-20 script readings during 4 day rehearsal period</p> | <p>Rural school district in central Texas (50% Hispanic, 35% Anglo, 10% African-American, 5% Asian; 65% FRL) 4 2nd grade classrooms, randomly selected, n=66 students</p> | <p>Although students in both treatment groups at all levels of ability made statistically significant gains, there was no significant difference in the gains between students who received RT plus explicit instruction in aspects of fluency and students who received only the RT intervention. Low achievement students made statistically significant gains in rate, retelling, and expressiveness. High-achievement readers made statistically significant gains in measures of comprehension and word recognition.</p> |

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|--|---|--|--|---|--|
| <p>“I Never Thought I Could Be A Star”: A Reader’s Theatre Ticket to Fluency (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999)</p> | <p>“An interpretive reading activity in which readers use their voices to bring characters to life. Unlike conventional theater, RT 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.” P. 326</p> | <p>Influence of RT on the fluency of second-grade students who need more practice to make their hesitant reading more fluid.</p> | <p>10 weeks of RT in language arts class, 30 minute daily sessions</p> | <p>2 classrooms, 2nd graders, inner-city school districts.</p> <p>1 class Hispanic and low SES, 1 class with mixed ethnicity and SES</p> <p>Matched comparison classrooms</p> <p>Used lower and middle level reading series text for scripts; 5-day instructional plan.</p> <p>Formed 3 “repertory companies” per class: low, middle, and upper level.</p> <p>Each student has 2 scripts: home and school Script read 15-20 times.</p> | <p>Quantitative.</p> <p>Pre- and post-assessments of students’ oral readings of unrehearsed stories from same or similar series used in repertory groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, there was an average rate increase of 17 words per minute for the RT classrooms, whereas two similar classes of second graders, who had the series books but no RT, gained an average of 6.9 words per minute. • Mixed results in reading level gains • Most children showed improvement in oral reading fluidity, phrasing, and expressiveness based on 5 point rating scale <p>Qualitative.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers observed improved reading comprehension and opportunity to practice reading |

| Title | Readers' Theatre Definition | Research Questions | Program Length | Design | Results |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| <p>Some of the Benefits of Readers Theater Participation for Second-Grade Title I Students (Millin & Rinehart, 1999)</p> | <p>“Readers theater activities essentially involve choosing something to read to an audience, practicing so that one can read the selection with accuracy and expression, and then reading the text for an audience. We also incorporated some other general criteria: 1.Emphasis is placed on reading rather than on props, costumes, or acting 2.A narrator may explain related information about setting and action that is not included in the dialogue 3.Participants read parts rather than memorize them 4.Voice inflections and facial expressions, rather than action, express mood 5.Practice of the material every day is essential.”p.73</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the effects of readers’ theater activities on the oral reading performance (accuracy, fluency, and comprehension) of elementary children receiving Title I reading services? 2. What are the effects of readers’ theater participation on the reading attitudes of these same students? 3. How does the effects of readers theater participation compare to the effects of a more traditional remedial approach? | <p>7 weeks of RT daily in treatment group, no RT & very little oral reading instruction in control group</p> | <p>28 2nd graders from 5 Title I reading classes in 2 neighboring public school districts in Southwest PA, low –mid class. Random assignment to experimental and control groups; (exp. Group 7 weeks RT, control no RT)</p> | <p>Quantitative.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant gains in oral reading ability and reading comprehension and nearly significant gains in oral reading rate in RT group over control group • No significant difference in attitude toward reading between RT and control group <p>Qualitative.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observed changes in attitude and oral reading ability |

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| <p>“Don’t Think for a Minute that I’m Getting Up There”: Opportunities for Readers’ Theater in a Tutorial for Children with Reading Problems (Rinehart, 1999)</p> | <p>“Simply stated, readers’ theater is an interpretive activity in which children practice and perform for others a scripted reading. The performance has the potential for readers ‘to bring characters to life through their voices and gestures...’ (Rinehart cites Sloyer, 1982, p.3)”p.75</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Would it be possible to successfully include readers’ theater activities within a broader instructional context? 2. Would we meet the instructional criteria associated with readers’ theater guidelines? 3. What instructional links, benefits, and concerns might arise from these efforts? | <p>6 weeks, 16-20 sessions, 80 minutes of readers theater performance</p> | <p>Action research with 1st and 2nd graders in a multi-faceted reading tutorial for children with serious reading problems Participant observation</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Numerous readers’ theater activities were included during the tutorial, with their preparation and performance successfully meeting instructional guidelines 2. Readers’ theater activities provided these less-skilled readers with additional opportunities for sustained and fluent reading 3. Teachers were able to orchestrate an integration of readers’ theater within broader instructional intents 4. Opportunities for multiple exposure and practice played a vital role in the accomplishments 5. An important part of the value of readers’ theater appeared to be integrally linked to affect and social dimensions |

| Title | Readers' Theatre Definition | Research Questions | Program Length | Design | Results |
|--|--|--|----------------|----------------|---|
| Nurturing Emergent Readers through Readers Theater (Moran, 2006) | "Readers theater is a staged reading of a play or dramatic piece of work designed to entertain, inform or influence" p.317 | Descriptive study; recommendations of best practices in RT | Not applicable | Not applicable | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluency • Diverse Skill Levels • Developmentally Appropriate Texts • Visual and Aural Aids • Children's Dramatic Experience level • Model Expressive Reading • Practice • Be Persistent • Involve Families • Perform for an Audience |

| Title | Readers' Theatre Definition | Research Questions | Program Length | Design | Results |
|---|--|---|----------------|----------------|---|
| Using Readers Theatre to Foster Fluency in Struggling Readers: A Twist on the Repeated Reading Strategy (Tyler & Chard, 2000) | "Readers Theatre 'productions' afford students the opportunity to select, rehearse, and present short dramas to classmates or others without the stress of memorizing lines or the bother and expense of elaborate costumes or props...Students read from the scripts, focusing their energies on interpreting and sharing their understanding of a character through appropriate intonation and oral expression (Readers Theatre International, 1996-1997)."p.166 | Theoretical piece on benefits of RT for fluency | Not applicable | Not applicable | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice • Peer Interaction & Cooperation • Performance |

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