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Readers Theatre and Reading Comprehension: An Experimental Study Among Grade 7 Students

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Abstract

Many students can decode but fail to construct meaning from text. Readers Theatre (RT) — a repeated-reading, prosody-focused, performance-based approach — has been proposed to support fluency and comprehension through repeated, purposeful reading, enhanced prosody, and social/interpretive engagement. The present study tests whether RT produces greater comprehension gains than traditional oral text reading among Grade 7 students. True-experimental design with random assignment of two intact Grade 7 sections: experimental (RT; n = 30) and control (traditional oral reading; n = 30). Two trial runs were conducted using two different narrative texts. Pre-tests and post-tests (teacher-designed, aligned to a table of specifications) measured reading comprehension for each trial. Descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests (α = .05) were used to evaluate differences between groups. Both groups began with very low pre-test comprehension levels. In Trial 1 the experimental group's MPS rose from 42.17 (very poor) to 76.67 (good); the control group rose from 36.83 to 56.17. The original thesis reported a t-test for the Trial 1 post-test difference (T = 10.883, p < .001). In Trial 2 the experimental group's MPS rose from 28.50 to 70.33, while the control group rose from 35.83 to 51.33; reported t for the Trial 2 post-test difference was T = 2.311, p = .050. Across trials the experimental group's average percent gain was reported as 113.12% vs. 50.59% for the control group. (Note: reported degrees of freedom in the original document appear incorrect; see Methods/Limitations.)Readers Theatre produced substantially larger comprehension gains than the traditional method on the measures used. Results are consistent with theories linking repeated/prosodic reading and active reader–text engagement to deeper comprehension (e.g., repeated reading automaticity, transactional theory, and multiple-intelligences framing). Future work should (a) report correct inferential-test degrees of freedom and effect sizes; (b) use standardized comprehension measures and blind scorers; and (c) examine generalizability across grades, texts, and longer follow-up periods.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension — the construction of meaning from text — is central to student success across the curriculum. Although basic literacy rates may be high in some contexts, many learners continue to demonstrate weak comprehension, which undermines achievement

in other subject areas. Traditional text-reading approaches often emphasize decoding and literal detail recall while providing limited repeated practice, prosodic modeling, or collaborative interpretation opportunities that support deeper meaning-making.

Readers Theatre (RT) is a performance-based instructional approach characterized by repeated oral readings, expressive prosody, and minimal staging. RT integrates several empirically supported components for improving reading: (1) repeated reading (which supports automaticity and frees cognitive resources for comprehension; Samuels, 1979), (2) modeled and guided reading promoting phrasing and prosody (Schreiber, 1980), (3) meaning-making through role-taking and interpretive discussion consistent with transactional reader–text theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), and (4) engagement that can be understood through multiple-intelligences and socially interactive learning frameworks (Gardner, 1983; Slavin, 1987). These complementary theoretical lenses suggest RT should improve not just oral fluency but also deeper comprehension by enriching background knowledge, supporting multiple modes of encoding (aural, linguistic, interpersonal), and encouraging repeated processing of text.

Empirical work shows mixed but generally positive effects for RT on fluency and, in some studies, on comprehension (Rasinski, 2004; Clark et al., 2009). Repeated reading increases automaticity and can shift attention to meaning (Samuels, 1979), while transactional perspectives emphasize how reader engagement and background knowledge interact with the text to create meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978). Schreiber's work links acquisition of reading fluency to comprehension processes (Schreiber, 1980), and Slavin's cooperative-learning research shows that structured group activities can enhance achievement when well implemented (Slavin, 1987). Gardner's theory suggests RT may appeal to multiple intelligences (linguistic, musical, interpersonal), increasing students' opportunity to process and retain text content (Gardner, 1983).

1.1.Research questions and hypotheses

Q1: What are pre-test comprehension levels of experimental and control groups before instruction?

H1 (exploratory): No systematic pre-test advantage is expected after random assignment.

Q2: Does Readers Theatre produce greater post-test reading comprehension than traditional oral reading in Trial 1?

H2: The RT (experimental) group will have significantly higher post-test comprehension scores than the control group after Trial 1.

Q3: Does Readers Theatre produce greater post-test reading comprehension than traditional oral reading in Trial 2?

H3: The RT group will have significantly higher post-test comprehension scores than the control group after Trial 2.

Q4: Are comprehension gains (pre→post) larger across trials for the RT group than for the control group?

H4: The RT group will show larger percent gains across trials.

2. METHODS

2.1.Design

A true-experimental, between-groups design with random assignment to experimental (Readers Theatre) and control (traditional oral reading) conditions. Two independent trial runs used different narrative texts to assess replication.

2.2.Participants

Participants were two intact Grade 7 sections at Blancia College Foundation, Inc. in Molave, Zamboanga del Sur (school year 2016–2017). Each section contained 30 students (total N = 60). Both sections were heterogeneous; assignment to experimental vs. control was randomized by lottery. (Because entire sections were used, no sampling beyond random assignment was performed.)

2.3.Materials / Instruments

Two narrative reading passages from English Communication Arts and Skills Through Filipino Literature for Grade 7: (1) “The Cycle of the Sun and Moon” (Trial 1) and (2) “Princess Urduja” (Trial 2).

Pre-test and post-test instruments (teacher-developed), constructed using a Table of Specifications to sample literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension items aligned with learning objectives for each passage. (Original thesis indicates validity procedures via TOS; further psychometric detail was not available in the document.)

2.4.Procedure

Permissions and school coordination were secured.

Randomization assigned one section to RT (experimental) and one to traditional reading (control).

For each trial run: (a) pre-test administered, (b) four instructional sessions (lesson implementation, with RT or traditional activities as described below), (c) post-test administered. RT implementation: students read roles expressively with repeated readings, teacher modeling, and minimal staging. Control implementation: conventional oral reading and discussion.

Tests were scored and compiled for analysis.

2.5.Data analysis

Computed Mean Percentage Scores (MPS) and percent gains (pre→post) per group and trial.

Independent-samples t-tests ($\alpha = .05$) compared group means on pre-test and post-test for each trial. The original thesis reported t-values and p-values; raw item-level data and score distributions were not provided here, so statistical results are reported as provided by the original study. Note: Several inferential-test outputs in the original thesis reported degrees of freedom ($df = 2$) that are inconsistent with the sample size ($n = 30$ per group); see Limitations.

3. RESULTS

(Results below reproduce and integrate the means, percent gains, and inferential-statistic values reported in the original thesis.)

3.1.Trial 1 — “The Cycle of the Sun and Moon”

Pre-test: Experimental MPS = 42.17 (Very poor); Control MPS = 36.83 (Very poor).

Post-test: Experimental MPS = 76.67 (Good); Control MPS = 56.17 (Poor).

Percent gain: Experimental 79.45% vs. Control 57.92%.

Inferential test (as reported in thesis): Post-test difference T = 10.883, p < .001 (reported df = 2 in thesis). This reported t indicates a statistically significant advantage for the experimental group on the Trial 1 post-test.

3.2.Trial 2 — "Princess Urduja"

Pre-test: Experimental MPS = 28.50 (Very poor); Control MPS = 35.83 (Very poor). No significant pre-test difference was reported (reported T = 1.758, p = .084).

Post-test: Experimental MPS = 70.33 (Good); Control MPS = 51.33 (Poor).

Percent gain: Experimental 146.78% vs. Control 43.26%.

Inferential test (as reported in thesis): Post-test difference T = 2.311, p = .050 (reported df = 2), which the thesis treats as reaching the α = .05 threshold.

3.3.Across trials

Overall average percent gain (pre→post across both trials): Experimental = 113.12%; Control = 50.59%.

Test of difference between trial post-tests (reported): T = 4.083, p < .001 (reported df = 2), indicating a significant difference in post-test results across trials (as reported in thesis).

Important note on reported statistics: the thesis reports T-values and p-values but lists df = 2 for every t-test. Given two groups of n = 30, the expected df for independent-samples t-tests would normally be approximately 58 (n1 + n2 − 2). The presence of df = 2 is incongruent with sample sizes and suggests a reporting or typographical error in the original document. The t and p values reported are treated here as reported by the thesis; for publication, the correct df, exact p-values, and effect sizes (Cohen's d) should be calculated and reported using raw or item-level data.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1.Interpretation in light of theory and prior research

The findings — larger comprehension gains for the RT group across both trial runs — align with theoretical mechanisms and prior empirical work:

Repeated reading and automaticity. Samuels (1979) argued that repeated reading fosters automatic word recognition and frees cognitive resources for comprehension. The RT condition's repeated, purposeful readings plausibly increased automaticity and enabled students to attend more to meaning (Samuels, 1979).

Prosody and phrasing. Schreiber (1980) emphasized the role of prosodic reading and phrasing in comprehension; RT's emphasis on expressive reading likely improved chunking of phrases and prosodic cues that signal syntactic and semantic structure (Schreiber, 1980).

Transactional meaning-making. Rosenblatt's transactional theory explains how readers' responses and background knowledge interact with text to produce meaning; RT's role-taking and group interpretation likely supported richer reader–text transactions (Rosenblatt, 1978).

SCIRP

Multiple intelligences and engagement. Gardner's theory suggests that activities that engage multiple modalities (linguistic, musical, interpersonal) are more likely to reach diverse learners; RT's multimodal nature could therefore increase engagement and comprehension (Gardner, 1983).

Cooperative/structured active learning. Slavin's cooperative-learning research shows that structured group activities can enhance achievement when well designed; RT's small-group role reading and collaborative rehearsal may have harnessed cooperative benefits (Slavin, 1987).

4.2.Strengths and practical implications

Experimental design with random assignment and replication across two texts strengthens internal validity and supports practical classroom application of RT.

RT requires little material investment (scripts/short passages) and can be integrated into routine reading instruction to promote both fluency and comprehension.

4.3.Limitations

Statistical reporting issues. As noted, degrees of freedom reported (df = 2) are inconsistent with sample sizes; original raw data were not available here to recompute tests. For publication, authors must provide correct df, test-statistic computations, p-values, and effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's d or partial eta squared).

Measures and reliability. The pre/post tests were teacher-developed — psychometric properties (reliability, validity beyond TOS alignment) were not reported in item-level detail. Use of standardized comprehension measures or reporting of internal consistency would strengthen claims.

Blinding and scoring. There's no mention of blind scorers or inter-rater reliability when scoring constructed responses (if any).

Generalisability. The study used two sections at a single school; replication across schools, grade levels, and text types is recommended.

5. CONCLUSION

This shows that Readers Theatre produced substantially larger comprehension gains than traditional oral reading in the sample and measures used. The effects fit theoretical expectations linking repeated, prosodic, and socially engaged reading to comprehension. To prepare this for journal submission we should next (a) recalculate inferential statistics and effect sizes from raw data, (b) include reliability evidence for the instruments, and (c) prepare the manuscript in a journal template with word counts and required author notes.

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