

# Using Readers Theater to Differentiate Instruction

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**Abstract:** Regardless of grade level, English Language Arts (ELA) teachers are faced with the challenge of providing effective reading instruction to students that represent a variety of skill and interest levels. While no “one-size-fits-all” approach exists, research shows that using drama-based literacies such as Readers Theater help differentiate instruction and contribute to increased levels of fluency, engagement, and comprehension for pre-K-12 learners. This article will provide the reader with an understanding of Readers Theater, explore the current research regarding its impact, and provide suggestions for implementation in an ELA classroom.

## Introduction

It was the beginning of August and Mr. Taylor was anxious about starting his twelfth year of teaching tenth grade English Language Arts (ELA) in the coming week. The past two years at Lincoln High had been everything but ordinary for him and his students, having been in remote learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. During that time, few of Mr. Taylor’s students completed any assigned work and many failed to log in for their virtual learning classes. Because of this, Mr. Taylor was especially worried that some students’ ability to read will have been negatively impacted. In response, Mr. Taylor had designed a literature circle unit for the start of the year in an attempt to meet the unique needs of a variety of learners.

Mr. Taylor’s class is now two weeks into their literature circle unit, and he is noticing some issues among several of his groups. Although some are working with little needed intervention, others have struggled from the start. Mr. Taylor realizes that, rather than engage each type of student, the autonomy provided by this unit for students has served to expose their strengths and weaknesses.

The following describes one literature circle, which is representative of several other struggling groups among the five tenth-grade periods Mr. Taylor teaches. Stella is an avid reader. When assigned reading for homework, she always completes it. In fact, she typically reads ahead and spends time re-reading assigned work so that she is prepared to engage in literature circle discussion during class. Student A also excels in fluency, automatically recognizing words so that she can read them clearly and with expression. Michael is disengaged and often has his head on his desk during group work. At Mr. Taylor’s request, he will raise it. However, he refuses to engage in dialogue concerning the text and does not complete assigned reading at home. Megan works hard to complete assigned reading and attempts to participate in literature circle discussion, but she shows signs that she is not comprehending class content. Her scores on simple comprehension quizzes have suffered and she explains before class one day to Mr. Taylor that, although she reads everything assigned, she often “get[s] to the bottom of a page and [does not] remember what [she] read”, which causes her to be frustrated and want to give up trying.

Perplexed by the varying performance by his students during this unit and confused about how he might meet their needs, Mr. Taylor reaches out to Mr. Johnson, his department chair, to seek his advice. Specifically, Mr. Taylor wishes to address his students' struggles with reading fluency and comprehension. In addition, he wonders if there is a way that he might make reading more engaging. Mr. Johnson responds empathetically, explaining that those in his classroom are struggling in a similar manner. He then suggests that Mr. Taylor research Readers Theater, an activity whereby students are assigned a role within a script, read that script multiple times, and then "perform" it in front of an audience. He explains that this has proven to be an effective activity in his classroom in the past, and that this may be a means by which Mr. Taylor can meet his students' needs and make reading more engaging and enjoyable for them.

## The Issue

The variety of students in Mr. Taylor's classroom is not uncommon and presents challenges all ELA educators must attempt to navigate. Although some students flourish when given autonomy, others struggle if content has not been differentiated to suit their interests. While some students excel at reading independently, others struggle with comprehension or fluency, making it a challenge they feel ill-equipped to successfully accomplish. In addition to the variety of student preferences and performance-levels in standard classrooms, ELA educators are faced with teaching students who increasingly struggle in their ability to read. According to Allington (2011), "two of every three students in U.S. schools have reading proficiencies below the level needed to adequately do grade-level work" (p. 1). On top of this, research indicates that pre- and in-service educators receive inadequate training as it relates to reading instruction (Moats, 1994). How, then, are teachers to meet the needs of each student? Although no one-size-fits-all reading approach exists, Readers Theater is one tool educators should consider implementing in their classrooms to meet their students' diverse needs and interests.

## What Is Readers Theater and Why Is It Effective?

Readers Theater is a drama-based literacy strategy where students engage in "rehearsing and performing scripts for an audience" (Young et al., 2019, p. 1). In its Position Statement on Drama-Based Literacies, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) explains that "Drama occupies a legitimate place in literacy classrooms and has the potential to democratize instruction, amplify students' meaning making, and support crucial literacy as learners play around with and in all kinds of texts" (para. 1). The NCTE's explanation of drama-based literacy, then, describes it as a collaborative effort where students construct meaning through performance. Such "meaning making" is achieved, the NCTE explains, by empowering students to allow their creativity to become a crucial factor in the interpretation of text. They primarily do so through the vehicle of emotion, which might be introduced through "sound, intensity, and inflection" (NCTE, 2020, para. 4) while reading.

After assigning each student a role from the text, the class typically reads the script several times in anticipation of a final performance. "The instructional focus

in readers theater,” according to Young et al. (2019), “is on reading and performing a text in an expressive manner that is meaningful and satisfying to an audience” (p. 2). Research shows that Readers Theater is an effective form of reading instruction that can be used to differentiate reading instruction for a wide variety of readers to increase levels of fluency, engagement, and comprehension.

## Improving Reading Fluency

Fluency refers to a student’s ability to automatically decode words during reading, allowing them to read with accuracy, speed, and prosody. Mraz et al. (2013) explain that prosody is “the ability of the reader to read with appropriate intonation, expression, and phrasing” (p. 166). Readers Theater contributes to fluency due to the repetition involved in the reading process. As students continue practicing a script, they become more familiar with the words within it, alleviating the cognitive space necessary for decoding and enabling them to read with fluency. Mraz et al. (2013) also note that fluency is highly related to a student’s ability to comprehend material. They explain that, because one who reads fluently decodes words “instantly and independently”, they are able to “free up cognitive processes for higher level comprehension” (p. 164). Therefore, if students lack fluency in their reading, Readers Theater, which engages students in the repeated reading of a text over several days, can be used as a means of increasing fluency which in turn contributes to an increase in a student’s ability to comprehend material.

Multiple researchers have found that the implementation of Readers Theater in diverse classrooms contributes to increased levels of fluency. In “Readers Theater: ‘Hold on, Let’s Read it Again’”, Garrett and O’Connor (2010) studied the impact of the implementation of Readers Theater in four southeastern elementary special education classrooms on “letter recognition, initial reading level, fluency score, and comprehensions score” (p. 12). These classrooms consisted of students from kindergarten through fifth grade. Over the course of a school year, these teachers used readers theater in different ways “based on the needs of their schedules” (p. 12) students and the challenges associated with their classroom configurations and At the conclusion of the year, students were measured on a four-point scale over the previously mentioned reading criteria and test results indicated that readers theater contributed to an increase in each of the four criteria. In terms of fluency, the “average change...was .9, or almost one rating level,” (p. 12). indicating that the use of Readers Theater is effective in contributing to increased levels of reading fluency

## Fostering Engaged Reading

A lack of student engagement during class reading is often a struggle ELA educators face. A variety of factors contribute to a lack of student engagement, including a student’s disinterest in the material presented, how content is read, and/or a student’s ability to engage based on their reading level and fluency. In their study on the effects of implementing Readers Theater in elementary special education classrooms, Hautala et al. (2022) compared the effects of implementing once-a-week Readers Theater instruction to “traditional oral reading interventions” (p. 4). on fluency, reading comprehension, and engagement. The results of their study indi-

cated that, because those who received Readers Theater instruction were given the task of a culminating performance, they were “more emotionally and behaviorally engaged” (p. 13). Mraz et al. (2013) concur with their research, explaining that the culminating performance and element of choice in textual interpretation inherent to the practice of Readers Theater lend themselves to increased student engagement. They explain that “When students are provided with open-ended tasks that include choice, children are more interested and tend to expend more effort learning and understanding the material” (p. 169).

## Ensuring Comprehension

Readers Theater is grounded in automaticity theory. This theory, posed by LaBerge and Samuels in 1974, claims that as a reader’s fluency concerning a text increases his or her ability to comprehend said material also increases (Samuels, 1979). Samuels (1979) explains that once fluency is reached, automaticity takes place. Automaticity, he explains, occurs when one can immediately decode and read a word, therefore decreasing the attention required for this task and making more attention “available for comprehension” (p. 405). Thus, according to automaticity theory, Readers Theater, which relies upon the rehearsal or rereading of text in preparation for a final performance, may contribute to increased comprehension for students. A variety of research findings support Samuel’s (1979) perspective. In their research on the daily implementation of Readers Theater instruction for a group of seventy-six second-grade students, Young et al. (2019) compared the effects on comprehension of implementing this drama-based literacy versus a control group that emphasized traditional reading instruction. After eighteen weeks, students were asked to complete the Gates-MacGintie Reading Test (GMRT-4), a standardized test that measures “students’ decoding skills, word knowledge (vocabulary), and reading comprehension” (Young et al., 2019, p. 5) The results of the standardized test indicated that there “were statistically significant...effects on students’ reading comprehension scores” (p. 7). Because of this, Young et al. (2019) concluded that “teachers could consider consistently implementing readers theater in their classrooms” (p. 9).

## Implementing Readers Theater

### *Identifying a Text.*

While research surrounding Readers Theater points to its efficacy in providing valuable reading instruction to a variety of students, little has been stated regarding its practical implementation in classrooms. One of the benefits of using Readers Theater is that it can be used as a tool for improving fluency, engagement, and comprehension regardless of student reading level or performance. One way that educators can further differentiate instruction during Readers Theater and ensure its effectiveness is by selecting texts that are appropriate for a student’s age and reading level. Moran and Jo (2006) suggest choosing texts “that will be sufficiently challenging while remaining within reach” (p. 320). Because variability exists within classrooms, this may mean that teachers need to separate students into groups based

on reading level. In addition, teachers should consider providing students texts that are of interest to them. Doing so, Moran and Jo (2006) explain, makes a text accessible and contributes to student engagement.

Although educators should limit their selection of texts for Readers Theater to those that are age-appropriate and interesting to their students, they should not feel limited by selecting plays as the only genre with which their students can use this exercise. Young and Ortlieb (2018) explain that teachers should consider turning existing stories or poetry into scripts for their students. They even suggest, to provide students the opportunity to engage in higher level learning, that they be given the task of “[creating] parodies of existing fictional texts, and therefore intentionally [changing] the voice of the text and/or meaning” (p. 890).

### ***Implementing Readers Theater Instruction.***

Many studies on the effectiveness of Readers Theater were measured by comparing standardized results of students who received it in their daily instruction to a control group who received similar literacy instruction without Readers Theater over a specified period, often spanning several weeks to months in duration (Garrett & O'Connor, 2010; Martinez et al., 1998; Mraz et al., 2013; Young et al., 2019). During this time, those within the Readers Theater group received instruction on a five-day cycle, whereby a text was presented to students on Monday and a final performance was delivered by students on Friday in front of an audience. Others, such as Young and Ortlieb (2018), have suggested that using this five-day cycle in isolation rather than over several months will also contribute to positive results for students' fluency, engagement, and comprehension. Regardless of duration, researchers of Readers Theater indicate that best practice with this exercise should follow some version of the following format. On day one, the teacher should introduce students to the text and model reading with prosody. They should then assign students roles for their selected text. Days two through four should include a variety of choral and re-reading exercises as well as opportunities to engage with difficult vocabulary. Finally, on day five, students' work culminates in a final performance in front of an audience that may consist of their peers in other classes, teachers, or even school administrators.

## **Conclusion**

All ELA educators are faced with the challenge of providing effective reading instruction to a wide variety of students, many of whom struggle to read at grade-level. In addition, teachers are faced with a growing culture of students who struggle to focus during reading instruction, creating an added emphasis for teachers to create content that is both engaging and fun. ELA teachers should consider consistently implementing Readers Theater in their classrooms to meet a variety of student learning needs and interests and to promote student engagement. Doing so provides the opportunity for all students, regardless of reading level, to challenge themselves, have fun, and grow as readers.

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Jamey Burson received a Bachelor of Business Administration from the University of Toledo in 2019 and returned to UT to earn a Master of Education in 2022. Upon completion of his degree, he will begin teaching sophomore and junior English at St. John's Jesuit High School in Fall, 2022.