

Does Reader's Theater Influence the Reading Attitudes and Fluency of Fourth- and Fifth-Grade Students in a Special Education Class?

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Key Words

Fluency, repeated reading, Reader's Theater, reading attitudes, special education students

Abstract

The purpose of this action research study was to determine whether Reader's Theater influenced the reading attitudes and fluency of fourth and fifth graders in my special education class. Students practiced the fluency strategy of rereading through Reader's Theater scripts daily throughout a week for four weeks. Results indicated that fluency levels increased in both experimental and comparison groups. Reader's Theater improved students' attitudes toward fluency practice.



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Background

Of concern for every fourth grade teacher is the statistic that nearly forty percent of fourth graders are nonfluent readers (Danne, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman & Oranje, 2005). Additionally, the volume and complexity of reading expectations and materials increase in upper grades, leaving “nonfluent” students struggling with schoolwork, self-confidence, and, often as a result, poor attitudes toward reading.

Fluency is a reading skill that is considered the “bridge” between decoding and comprehension, so it is vital students develop this important link in the reading process (Rasinski, 2004). One way readers improve fluency is to practice oral reading through reading the same text repeatedly; in fact, numerous studies have documented the positive effects of repeated oral reading (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Dowhower, 1987; Herman, 1985; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rashotte & Torgesen, 1985; Rasinski, 1990; Samuels, 1979; Sindelar, Monda, & O’Shea, 1990; Weinstein & Cooke, 1992). Independent, silent reading also supports fluency development (Manning & Manning, 1984; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). Other studies have touted the benefits of Reader’s Theater as an engaging instructional approach that integrates repeated oral reading and independent silent reading in an authentic student-centered performance (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002).

While several studies have examined the effects of repeated reading on students with special learning needs, there are only a few studies that have investigated the use of Reader’s Theater with students in a special education class. Therefore, the purpose of this experimental study was determine whether Reader’s Theater would influence the reading attitudes and fluency skills of my fourth- and fifth-grade students who had identified, special learning needs. The research question guiding this study was, how does Reader’s Theater influence the reading attitudes and fluency of fourth- and fifth-grade students in a special education class?

What is Reader’s Theater?

Reader’s Theater is an authentic and entertaining activity of repeated reading that has been shown through research to help students improve their word recognition, fluency, comprehension, and reading attitudes (Rasinski, 2001). The goal of Reader’s Theater is to increase students’ fluency levels and comprehension by allowing them rehearsal time to practice reading with expression and prosody, to read and reread for meaning, and to focus on word meanings (Rasinski, 2000). As such, it is an oral repeated reading activity in which students read scripts or stories, practicing their “parts” and getting assistance, as necessary, with vocabulary, phrasing, and expression. Moreover, the activity requires no props, costumes, or scenery. The teacher’s role is to choose the script and to model fluent, expressive reading so the students can hear good fluency.

Review of the Literature

Fluency

Reading fluency is defined as being “able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression” (NICHD, 2000, p.11). The three components of fluency are 1) *rate*, or the speed at which a person reads; 2) *accuracy*, which refers to a person’s ability to correctly read words in a text; and 3) *prosody*, which refers to stress, intonation, and pauses. Through the years, there has been no single agreed upon definition of fluency. Some definitions (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Samuels, 1979) emphasize the role of accuracy and automaticity in word recognition whereas others stress significance of the appropriate use of prosody, or spoken language features that make oral reading expressive (Allington, 1983; Dowhower, 1987). Still others assert that ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, reading fluency contributes to better comprehension (Rasinski, 1990; Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1993). Regardless of emphasis, however, it is generally agreed that fluent readers recognize words automatically, read aloud effortlessly and with expression, and focus on comprehension more than decoding. Rasinski (2000) contends reading fluency is a “bridge” between the two major components of reading – word decoding and comprehension. At one end of this bridge, fluency links to accuracy and automaticity with decoding. At the other end, fluency connects to comprehension through prosody, or expressive understanding. When students make gains in reading fluency, they are able to put their energies into comprehension, and they are able to analyze, interpret, draw conclusions, and infer meaning from texts.

Repeated reading

Repeated reading is one of the most documented techniques used to build fluency. This technique consists of rereading short selections numerous times until an acceptable standard has been made (Samuels, 1979). Repeated reading is based on a theory of automatic information processing, which posits a fluent reader who decodes text automatically is free to focus cognitive resources on comprehension (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

Repeated reading is the most universally used and one of the most highly effective remedial reading techniques to help at-risk and transitional readers achieve better fluency skills (Dowhower, 1987; Herman, 1985; NICHD, 2002; Rasinski, 1990; Samuels, 1979; Sindelar, et al., 1990). Furthermore, repeated reading has been shown to increase fluency and comprehension for disabled readers (e.g., Chard, et al., 2002; NICHD, 2002; O’Shea, Sindelar, & O’Shea, 1987; Rashotte & Torgesen, 1985; Samuels, 1979; Weinstein & Cooke, 1992). Yet, despite its clear benefits, Rasinski (1990) noted repeated reading might have several drawbacks. Over the long term, students may tire from its use and may lose interest in and motivation for the repetition of previously read material. Furthermore, repeated reading may be too time consuming for teachers as they are called on to help students who are experiencing difficulty in reading or decoding words in their initial repeated readings.

Reader's Theater

Reader's Theater is one approach of repeated reading that has been shown through research to increase students' fluency and reading attitudes (Martinez, et al., 1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). In addition to increasing fluency and attitudes, Reader's Theater has been known to increase sight word vocabulary and comprehension. It also provides opportunities to interpret dialogue, communicate meaning and awareness, and give students an appreciation of plays as a form of literature (Carrick, 2001). The performance of the Reader's Theater play is an authentic way for the student to make repeated reading meaningful and gives students an authentic purpose for practicing reading passages over and over. The repeated reading of the scripts increases fluency, which, in turn, improves comprehension and student attitudes toward reading.

Researchers have acknowledged that students' attitudes toward reading is a central factor affecting reading performance. According to McKenna and Kear (1990), these conclusions are based on a long history of research in which attitude and achievement have been consistently linked (e.g., Walberg & Tsai, 1985 as cited in McKenna & Kear, 1990). A national survey of attitudes toward reading revealed a negative trend in children's attitudes toward recreational reading and reading instruction as they pass through the elementary grades (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). Smith (cited in McKenna & Kear, 1990) observed, "the emotional response to reading... is the primary reason most nonreaders do not read" (McKenna & Kear, 1990, p. 177). The emphasis on reading proficiency, while critical, often overlooks the important role of a child's attitude in successful reading development. Both being a proficient, fluent reader and having a good attitude are very important to a student's ongoing reading success.

Reader's Theater gives teachers a way to incorporate repeated readings within a meaningful and purposeful context. While research on Reader's Theater and its components is largely positive, very little of it addresses the impact that Reader's Theater might have on students with special learning needs. The literature on Reader's Theater, and, the lack of focus on a special needs population prompted me to think about its potential in increasing the reading fluency and comprehension of my fourth- and fifth -grade students.

Methodology

Context

Willow Park, the elementary school where this study took place is one of 15 elementary schools within a large, urban school district with an "Effective" or better rating on the state report card. Even so, the school has met only one out of eight report card indicators. Still, Willow Park is in its third year of "school improvement," and it does have an "above" rating in its value-added measure. Willow Park's enrollment is 381 students with 50% Black, 3% Asian or Pacific Islander, 18% Hispanic, 12% Multi-racial, and 17% White. In addition 86% of students are economically disadvantaged, 23% are limited English proficient, and 12% of students are students with identified learning disabilities.

Twelve fourth- and fifth-grade students participated in this study. Of those, nine were boys and three were girls, and all the students were identified as students with special learning needs. Of the 12 students, eight were identified as specific learning disabled, three as cognitively disabled, and one was identified as having minor health impairment. The students' ages ranged from 10 to 11 years old. At the beginning of the school year, they had been assessed with a variety of reading levels, ranging from kindergarten to fourth-grade. This put some of the students "behind" their regular education peers.

The principal randomly assigned the students into two classes of students who attended a resource room class for part of the day for instruction in literacy and math; the study took place in the resource room, which was my class. During the other part of the day, the students remained with their regular teachers for instruction in science, social studies, art, music, physical education, and technology.

Teaching Intervention

For this study, the students in the "morning group" were selected to be the intervention group and the students in the "afternoon group" served as the comparison group. The intervention of Reader's Theater was implemented for about an hour each day of the week, for four weeks, for a total of about 20 instructional hours. In addition to Reader's Theater the intervention group received the typical reading instruction with the basal series. The comparison group received typical reading instruction only, using the basal reading series.

Rasinski (2003) described the implementation of Reader's Theater in the classroom, and I utilized the model for intervention group. The following summary outlines Rasinski's (2003) five-day plan for using Reader's Theater:

- Teacher Preparation: Write or choose a script for performance and make copies for the students.
- Monday: Introduce the concept of Reader's Theater or review if students have previously participated. Assign parts.
- Tuesday-Thursday: Rehearse in groups and individually, with teacher support in the classroom and at home
- Friday: Perform scripts for other students, parents, principal, etc.

Reader's Theater Scripts

1. Level E- "Mother Dog and Her Puppies," "When I Grow Up"
2. Level F- "Josh Gets Glasses," "Where is Cub?"
3. Level Q- "Coral Reefs," "Mermaid in a Teacup," "Who-Who is Afraid of the Dark!"
4. Level R- "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp."



Procedure

Before the week began, I chose scripts or plays that aligned to the reading levels of my students, and I took into consideration any topics of interests to my students. The students had a wide range of reading abilities, so I decided to split the group into two Reader's Theater groups, according to their reading levels. I chose scripts closest to the group's average reading level from "Reading a to z" (<http://www.readinga-z.com/book/scripts.php>), a website where the Reader's Theater scripts are leveled according to Fountas and Pinnell leveling guidelines. I modeled fluent reading by reading the scripts while the students listened. Then the students practiced reading their lines over and over until they acquired an appropriate level of fluency.

Each day I guided students in a discussion of the purpose and procedures for Reader's Theater in the whole group. We emphasized the following criteria: speak loudly enough for the audience to hear, pronounce your words correctly, read with appropriate expression and pace, take turns accurately on a consistent basis, hold the scripts below your face, and stand in one place.

Next, I worked with the lower Reader's Theater group while the higher-level group read their scripts together at another table. I introduced the scripts by talking about the content of the story. Then I modeled fluent reading of the script while the students followed along. Following the shared reading, the students picked their parts by volunteering, and, as they chose their parts, I highlighted their individual parts on the scripts. Then I switched groups by having the higher group work with me, and the lower group read their scripts together.



On days two through four, the students practiced their parts in class, on their own, in their groups and at home if necessary. They practiced their parts mainly at school; however, if a student was struggling, I sent the text home for practice. I met with each group to listen to them read and offered suggestions to the group or individuals, as needed. On day five, we performed our plays for another primary level classroom.

Data Collection

The 12 special education students who participated in this study were given a pretest at the beginning of the year and a post-test after the intervention, using the following measures: Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) Oral Reading Fluency (DIBELS Data System, n.d.), adapted Multidimensional Fluency Scale (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991), and the Garfield Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna, & Kear, 1990). In addition, I kept

field notes of my thoughts and student comments related to reading and Reader's Theater throughout the four weeks.

The DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) is a standardized, individually administered test of accuracy and fluency with connected text. The standardized set of passages and administration procedures are designed to identify children who may need additional instructional support and monitor progress toward instructional goals. A student's performance is measured by having him or her read a passage aloud for one minute. The number of correct words per minute from the three passages is calculated for the oral reading fluency score.

As students read an assigned DIBELS passage, their fluency level was scored on the adapted Zutell & Rasinski (1991) Multidimensional Fluency Scale. This scale encourages teachers to give each dimension of fluency equal consideration and to help to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of individual readers. The students were given a 1-4 score on their expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace to address Zutell and Rasinski's (1991) concerns that using single dimension fluency scales bring more disagreement on the ranking of a reader (Appendix A).

The Garfield Elementary Reading Attitude survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) is a tool designed to estimate the reading attitude levels of students. This Likert-type scale is based on the cartoon character Garfield and it is comprised of questions related to recreational and academic reading attitudes. According to McKenna and Kear (1990), this test does little to identify the causes of poor attitude or to suggest instructional techniques to improve attitudes, but it can make an initial assumption about attitudes of specific students or provide a group attitude profile (McKenna & Kear, 1990).

To assess the students, I gave a pretest and posttest of each of the above mentioned tests. The pretests were part of the typical beginning of the year assessments to identify academic learning needs. I gave a posttest of each assessment within one week of the final intervention lesson.

Following the data collection period, I implemented the strategy of Reader's Theater with the comparison group.

Results

What was the influence of Reader's Theater on fluency and reading attitudes of fourth and fifth graders in a special education class?

DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency

Table 1 shows the results of the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency, revealing a slightly greater gain for the intervention group than the comparison group in the pre-post mean scores. The intervention group showed a significant difference in the mean fluency scores, but the comparison group did not. The intervention group's post-test scores ($M=53.2$, $SD=38.1$) were significantly different from their pre-test scores ($M=38.5$, $SD=33.1$), $t(5)=3.66$, $p<0.01$ (two-

tailed), $d=0.41$. The comparison group's pre-test scores and post-test scores were not significantly different.

Table 1.

DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency Pre- and Post-Test Scores with Gains

| DIBELS Intervention Group | | | | DIBELS Comparison Group | | | |
|---------------------------|---------|----------|------|-------------------------|---------|----------|------|
| Students | Pretest | Posttest | Gain | Students | Pretest | Posttest | Gain |
| JH | 5 | 8 | 3 | JC | 15 | 21 | 6 |
| MK | 31 | 56 | 25 | AC | 42 | 61 | 19 |
| MP | 79 | 87 | 8 | CJ | 31 | 34 | 3 |
| CS | 32 | 43 | 11 | TE | 129 | 120 | -9 |
| MJ | 6 | 19 | 13 | AN | 79 | 125 | 46 |
| KO | 78 | 106 | 28 | CT | 100 | 106 | 6 |
| Mean | 38.5 | 53.2 | 14.7 | Mean | 66 | 77.8 | 11.8 |
| SD | 33.1 | 38.1 | 5 | SD | 40.2 | 41.3 | 1.1 |

Results of the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency revealed gains in fluency for both the intervention and comparison groups; however, a t -test showed the difference in the mean gain scores between the two groups was not significant: intervention group ($M=14.67$, $SD=9.8$); comparison group ($M=11.83$, $SD=17.3$), $p<0.75$, n.s.

Adapted Multidimensional Fluency Test

In general, there was no significant difference in the adapted multidimensional fluency test, overall, or in the sub-sections (Table 2). There was no significant increase of expression, volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace for either the intervention or comparison group. There was minimal gain of .25 in the intervention group and .17 in the comparison group.

Table 2.

Means and Gain Scores for the Adapted Multidimensional Fluency Test

| Group | Mean Pre | Mean Post | Gain | SD Pre | SD Post | p value |
|--------------|----------|-----------|------|--------|---------|---------|
| Experimental | 1.38 | 1.63 | 0.25 | 0.49 | 1.63 | 0.07 |
| Comparison | 2.08 | 2.25 | 0.17 | 0.98 | 1.02 | 0.17 |

Garfield Elementary Reading Attitude Test

The Reader’s Theater intervention proved to be a successful strategy relative to improving special needs students’ attitudes toward reading; the intervention group made a net gain of 0.48 and the comparison group only gained 0.05 by the time of the post-test. Figures 1 and 2 show these results both as a group and individually; the gains in perceptions of reading attitudes of the intervention students are significantly larger than those of the comparison group. The intervention of Reader’s Theater seemed to bring enthusiasm and excitement. Perhaps students were enthusiastic by the authentic purpose of performing for a primary class, which took place each Friday as a conclusion to several days of practice and re-reading. I believe this enthusiasm carried over to a more positive attitude in reading for the intervention group.

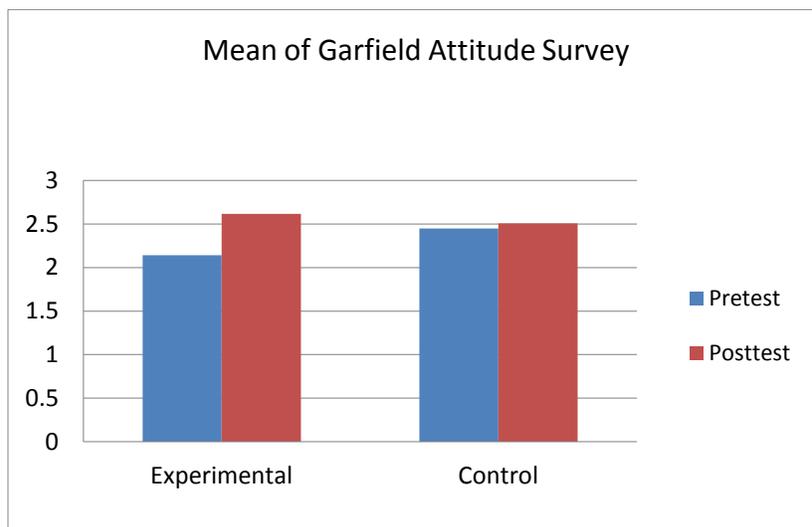


Figure 1. Means of Garfield Reading Attitude Survey

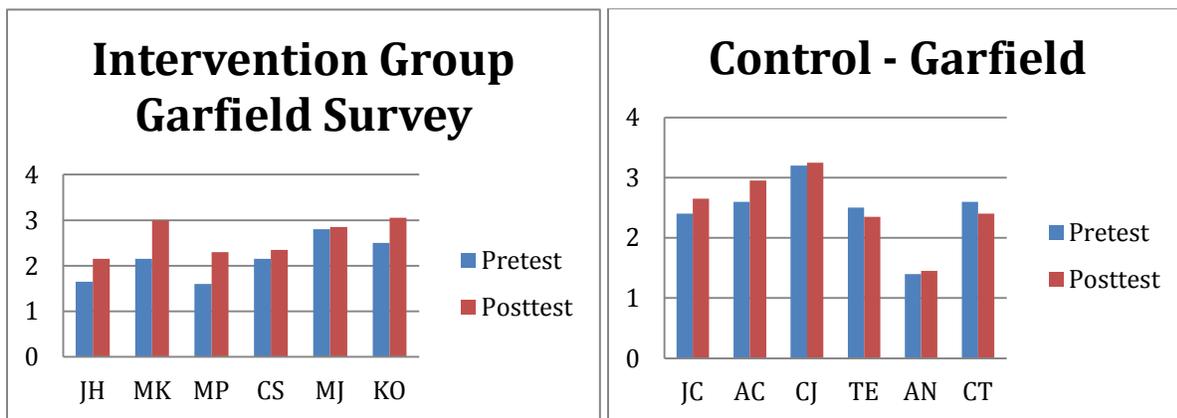


Figure 2. Garfield Reading Attitude Survey – Means for Individual Students

Specifically, on Question #13 of the Garfield survey, students are asked, ‘How do you feel about reading in school?’ This question is particularly important for this study since the Reader’s Theater intervention occurred during school reading time. The experimental group’s post-test scores (M=3.0) were much higher than their pre-test scores (M=1.83), whereas the comparison group’s pre-test scores and post-test scores (M=2.67) did not differ (Figure 3).

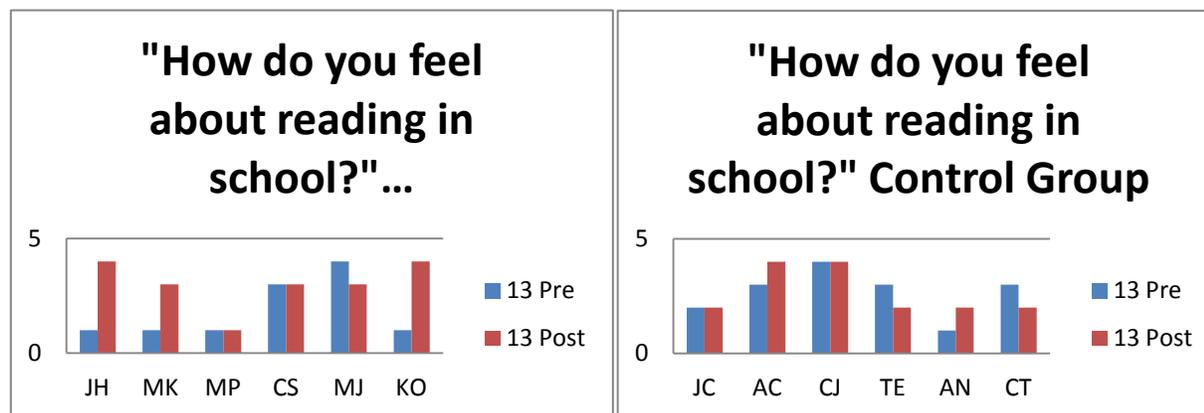


Figure 3. Garfield Reading Attitude Means for Individual Students for Question #13

Quantitative data yielded from the Garfield Reading Attitude Survey were corroborated by qualitative data as gathered through observations and field notes. Qualitatively, I observed changes in the attitude of the Reader’s Theater group. Anecdotal notes collected during the study reflected a shift from a passive attitude to one of eagerness from the students who participated in the Reader’s Theater performances. On day one, I announced that we were going to do Reader’s Theater, and the students just stared at me and said nothing. After the first week of practice and performance, the Reader’s Theater students’ attitudes began to change. Some of the comments from the intervention group were: “I like it!,” “It’s fun to do that,” “I like it because they laughed at my part,” “They clapped for me!,” “I like to do plays!,” “When are we going to get another play?”

Some of the student’s comments about Reader’s Theater:

“I like it!”

“It’s fun to do that.”

“I like it because they laughed at my part.”

“They clapped for me!”

“I like to do plays!”

“When are we going to get another play?”

Conclusions

Overall, results from this analysis indicate the Reader's Theater intervention produced fluency gains; the intervention group experienced a significant increase in the mean fluency scores from the DIBELS pre-test to post-test. The comparison group's data was complicated by two outliers who had unusually high DIBELS pre-test scores. Five out of six students in the comparison group did show an increase in fluency scores. Perhaps Reader's Theater is as effective as the typical fluency strategies incorporated into the basal reading series. However, there were significant increases in reading attitudes for the students who used Reader's Theater.

The most meaningful result of this study was revealed in the Garfield Elementary Attitude Survey and these data were supported by my own observations of student interactions and comments, as recorded in my field journal. As evidenced by attitude survey scores and class interactions, this enthusiasm carried over to a more positive attitude in reading and for practicing repeated reading for the intervention group. It seems the Reader's Theater method elicited enthusiasm and excitement for the reading that took place during class. Perhaps the authentic purpose of performing the Reader's Theater script for a primary class at the end of the week generated the enthusiasm.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study, which should be cited. First there were twelve fourth- and fifth-grade students with special learning needs who participated in the study, which means the results cannot be extrapolated to the broader population of special education students. Furthermore, the special needs of the students were varied and could not be generalized to a specific population. The study was short, four weeks, so a longer intervention period might produce different results. Also, the pretest was given at the beginning of the year and not immediately preceding the intervention. This could have affected the accuracy of the gain scores.

Reader's Theater provides an activity for implementing many fluency-building strategies, which help students strive to become fluent readers. In my classroom, Reader's Theater was an authentic and entertaining intervention, which encouraged student excitement and resulted in the increase of positive reading attitudes.

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Appendix A

Multidimensional Fluency Scale

| Dimension | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| A. Expression and Volume | Reads with little expression or enthusiasm in voice. Reads words as if simply to get them out. Little sense of trying to make text sound like natural language. Tends to read in a quiet voice. | Some expression. Begins to use voice to make text sound like natural language in some areas of the text, but not others. Focus remains largely on saying the words. Still reads in a quiet voice. | Sounds like natural language throughout the better part of the passage. Occasionally slips into expressionless reading. Voice volume is generally appropriate throughout the text. | Reads with good expression and enthusiasm throughout the text. Sounds like natural language. The reader is able to vary expression and volume to match his/her interpretation of the passage. |
| B. Phrasing | Monotonic with little sense of phrase boundaries, frequent word-by-word reading. | Frequent two- and three-word phrases giving the impression of choppy reading; improper stress and intonation that fail to mark ends of sentences and clauses. | Mixture of run-ons, mid-sentence pauses for breath, and possibly some chopiness; reasonable stress/intonation. | Generally well phrased, mostly in clause and sentence units, with adequate attention to expression. |
| C. Smoothness | Frequent extended pauses, hesitations, false starts, sound-outs, repetitions, and/or multiple attempts. | Several "rough spots" in text where extended pauses, hesitations, etc., are more frequent and disruptive. | Occasional breaks in smoothness caused by difficulties with specific words and/or structures. | Generally smooth reading with some breaks, but word and structure difficulties are resolved quickly, usually through self-correction. |
| D. Pace (during sections of minimal disruption) | Slow and laborious. | Moderately slow. | Uneven mixture of fast and slow reading. | Consistently conversational. |

Source: Adapted from "Training Teachers to Attend to Their Students' Oral Reading Fluency," by J. Zutell and T. V. Rasinski, 1991, *Theory Into Practice*, 30, pp. 211-217.