

1-1-2019

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Recommended Citation

Frericks, Natalie (2019) "Getting into character: A qualitative study on readers' theater and fluency," *Journal of Applied and Educational Research*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: 10.58809/QOPY1209

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/jaer/vol2/iss1/3>

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Getting into character: A qualitative study on readers' theater and fluency

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Abstract

The need for fluent readers is clear in schools today as many readers are lacking reading fluency. This qualitative study examined the influence Readers' Theater, a reading strategy, has on reading fluency. The following questions were addressed: 1) How does Reader's Theater influence reading fluency? 2) How did students' self-assessment influence reading fluency? 3) How did teacher assessment influence reading fluency? The participants included four third-grade students from an elementary school in the Midwest. The findings suggested that Readers' Theater positively influenced student's reading fluency. Students' self-assessment was helpful in getting students to become more aware of their reading. Teacher feedback and assessment was the most beneficial to student's reading during this study. Role duality and a shorter data collection timeline were limitations to this study. Given the positive results of this study, further research using the Reader's Theater strategy in other content areas should be explored.

Keywords: readers' theater, fluency, reading, self-assessment

A group of third graders gather around in a circle practicing reading their lines from their script. One person reads at a time, until it is the next person's turn. The teacher walks by listening in to see if the students are using the expression that they had practiced in their previous lesson together. They have been practicing for many days now, preparing for the big performance.

It is finally time to show off their hard work. Everyone grabs the script that they can now almost read in their sleep. The performance begins, each reader taking turns reading their lines clearly, smoothly, and expressively. They eagerly try to make the audience believe them as they read in character. The audience is silent. Their eyes moving from reader to reader, fully engaged in the story that they are telling with their words.

Finally, the last line is read and the audience claps for the performers. The readers feel confident, and proud as they bow to their audience. The teacher beaming from ear to ear, for she has just heard fluent, confident, expressive readers. This is a moment for which each teacher dreams.

Educators want their students to see themselves as readers and feel confident in their reading abilities. Building student's reading fluency is a part of the process. In order to help students with word recognition, rate in reading, comprehension, and overall reading confidence,

fluency must be on the forefront in our reading instruction. Described above, is a group of readers using the strategy called Readers' Theater (RT). This type of practice often done when prepping for a play performance, could also be applied to other reading contexts.

Readers' Theater History

According to Corcoran and Davis (2005), "fluency is the ability to read a text with speed and accuracy, recognizing each word effortlessly and beginning to construct meaning from each word and group of words as they read" (pg. 105). Fluency plays a huge part in student's reading abilities and comprehension skills. While speed and accuracy are important for students to master in reading, other factors are just as important. Educators seem focused on student accuracy and automaticity when it comes to assessing student's reading ability. But at what point do we address that students are reading like robots? Educators need to take into consideration the importance of prosody or student's expression and appropriate phrasing to convey meaning within a text. A student's fluent oral reading sounds like natural speaking (Young and Rasinski, 2009).

The importance of catching readers' fluency early on, and providing them support, is vital. Corcoran and Davis (2005) stated that "Approximately 75 percent of students who are

poor readers in third grade continue to be lower achieving readers in ninth grade and, in essence, do not recover their reading abilities into adulthood” (p. 105). If we want to increase the number of third grade proficient readers, we must be open to finding new ways to increase reading ability. Reader’s Theater is a place to start as a way to motivate students in reading.

Reader’s Theater has been around for a long time. In the 1800’s, it was used by Charles Dickens to turn literacy into performing arts (Gentile, 1981). It was a performance that told a story. With no stage nor props, Dickens wooed crowds of people with his performances. His performances became very well known in his time, and this tradition of Readers’ Theater became more popular as time went on. Today, RT begins by turning a familiar text into a script with characters and speaking parts for students. Each student is assigned a part to practice during a one to two week timeframe. With repeated opportunities to practice reading independently and collaboratively, students are also provided with feedback from their teacher to support their reading growth. This feedback reflects on students’ expression, fluency and accuracy. After practice and feedback, students perform in front of their peers as an audience. Reader’s Theater brings reading to life in classrooms today as it once historically entertained crowds of people.

Reader’s theater benefits

A common strategy deemed to enhance fluency is known as repeated readings, a strategy in which students are allotted time to practice reading the same text multiple times. Repeated readings are designed to increase reading fluency in the following ways: word recognition, rate, and understanding of the text (Corcoran & Davis, 2005). When it comes to student engagement and motivation, this strategy took its toll. When students simply read something repeatedly, their motivation declined. Reader’s Theater is one way to incorporate this strategy, while enhancing student motivation in reading, and increasing reading fluency. According to Kabilan and Kamaruddin (2010), this method was helpful in enhancing student’s motivation in reading and building a classroom environment where the interest is high to experiment and learn through literature rich experiences. They found RT to be an

authentic approach to exposing students to rereading for enhancement in fluency and it provided more of a purpose to repeated readings. It is more authentic because there is an audience for the students to perform in front of and a script of lines to practice. Vasinda & McLeod (2011) found reader’s theater offered a stronger purpose for their repeated readings and students were motivated.

Chou (2013) wrote that Reader’s Theater was a method to motivate students to become more engaged in reading through creativity and enjoyment. Lewis and Feng (2014) stated, “Reader’s Theater gives the students the opportunity to have fun by bringing the characters to life in the classroom” (p.9). It allowed students to feel free to be open and express themselves in such a fun and exciting way, while still providing a purposeful learning experience and building reading fluency. Students also have some ownership of making their characters come to life.

This method helps English Language Learners become more familiar with the content, vocabulary, and comprehension as well (Chou, 2013). Reader’s Theater is also a tool that helped all students feel success in reading, which was beneficial for varying ranges of readers and abilities in the classroom. Because students use listening, speaking, and reading skills, RT is helpful for English Language Learners. Reader’s Theater is adaptable to a range of learners and abilities, which makes it a great tool to use in the classroom (Lewis & Feng, 2014).

One more benefit to Reader’s Theater is social learning. Lin (2015) researched students as they worked with each other in groups to read the script aloud and understand the story. They gave each other help when needed, and they listen to each other speak their parts. This form of social learning engages students in their reading and motivates them to work hard for a common purpose. It becomes a team effort to work to improve their performance as a whole, while individually enhancing student’s reading fluency.

As the teacher-researcher, I have seen many students struggle with reading fluency and decided to formally study the process of fluency development during Reader’s Theater. This research studied the influence of third grade student’s participation in Reader’s Theater and the

role that plays in their reading fluency. The following questions will be addressed: 1) How did RT influence reading fluency? 2) How did students' self-assessment influence reading fluency? 3) How did teacher assessment influence reading fluency?

Method

The teacher-researcher chose to do a multi-case study in her classroom that followed four third-grade students and studied their reading fluency development. A multi-case study is designed to focus on one case with the intention to present the problems that arise with that case (Creswell, 2016). The teacher-researcher chose to explore how Reader's Theater influences reading fluency. She also studied participants' self-assessment of their reading fluency after participating in Reader's Theater.

Before the study began, approval was granted from an Institutional Review Board and from the school district where the study took place. The study took place in a Title 1 elementary school in the Midwest. The school consisted of 520 students including preschool, special education, and general education classes. The participants were selected based on purposeful sampling from students of the teacher researcher's classroom. The students chosen through purposeful sampling of students who were approaching grade level in reading. The following students were selected with assigned pseudonyms to assure anonymity: Michael was a 9-year-old African American, ELL male student. Ben was a 9-year-old white male student. Sam was a 9-year-old African American, ELL male student. Finally, Penny was a 9-year-old white female student.

The study took place in a general classroom consisting of six African American students, four American Indian students, six Caucasian students, two Hispanic students, and three students who are identified as biracial. The study was held during a flexible time in the classroom when students had time to practice. Students had many opportunities to read their Reader's Theater script independently. Students also met with their RT groups to practice their performance together as they would read it during the final performance. As stated by Corcoran and Davis (2005, p.106) about Reader's Theater,

students "rehearse until they are able to perform it fluently and with expression for an audience". The rehearsal timeframe was usually about two weeks to be ready to perform.

Over the three months of the study, the teacher-researcher tracked student reading fluency using fluency rubrics, took observation notes/field notes, and collected written conference notes. There were two fluency rubrics, one was used to track student reading fluency for the teacher-researcher to assess reading fluency. It included (a) pacing, (b) accuracy, and (c) expression. The teacher-researcher tracked to see if students were reading the text smoothly while paying attention to punctuation, reading the text with little to no errors, and if the students were changing their voice to match the tone of the text.

The second rubric was to help the students with self-assessment of their own reading fluency. This rubric was broken into four questions for the students to answer. Each of the following questions were presented in student-friendly language. a) Did I read the words correctly? b) Did I read the words not too fast, but not too slow? c) Did I read with feeling and not like a robot? d) Did I follow most or all of the punctuation marks? Students filled in a smiley face if they felt that they were successful with each area, or a sad face if they felt that they still needed some more practice. Finally, observations and conference notes were written to track fluency patterns and to communicate with students in the study. Those notes included observations of the students' reading, as well as feedback and comments provided by the teacher-researcher. This form of triangulation, or using multiple data sources, was done in order to make sure the teacher-researcher achieved validity and reliability in the data analysis.

At the beginning of this study, the teacher-researcher presented students with a poem to introduce them to the Reader's Theater process. Students were given a role for each script for a two-week time period. Parts were chosen for students for success by adjusting to student's ability. For all of the RT plays, each student was put into a group and given a role or part to play. Students had many designated times to practice independently. The teacher-researcher would check in and listen to students reading their lines

individually to provide feedback and take written notes. She also pulled students back as a group to practice all together, as well as independently. This would be another time when the teacher-researcher provided helpful feedback and took written notes. At the end of the second week, the students had rehearsed and were ready for the final performance. For the first Reader's Theater, students performed in front of their classmates. As students became more confident in the RT process, students eventually performed for other classes.

The teacher-researcher coded the data that were collected during the study including rubrics, observation notes, and conference notes. After the coding process, themes were developed through triangulation during constant comparative data analysis. The findings were written through thick description to add trustworthiness to the study. The teacher-researcher reviewed the data and codes developed several times to ensure validity. The teacher-researcher talked through these codes with colleagues and advisors. Any adjustments made to the original research plan were added.

The teacher-researcher took the data collected during the research study and looked for common themes. She looked at each student's data one by one. The teacher-researcher then collected patterns and tracked their progress on a written document that showed each student and their observations from the beginning of the study, to the end. This helped her see each student's fluency performance as well as how students were feeling about their reading performance as well. Once the data was collected on each student, the teacher-researcher looked for reading fluency, as well as expression in reading.

Findings

The findings of this study are reported for each case study participant and chronologically according to the timeline of the study. Pseudonyms are used in place of the student's names to protect the student's identities. The findings are presented in the timeline in which they occurred in the study.

Michael

Michael was nine years old during the study and enjoyed reading. During reading time, he was on task and enjoyed finding new books. In

reading group, he worked hard and had high participation. Michael was an ELL (English language learner) student, who asked clarifying questions about what he was reading. He tried hard in school and had a good attitude towards learning. Michael was chosen for this study because he was moving towards grade level expectations.

Michael did not have a lot of experience with Reader's Theater. He had only experienced it once in second grade. In the beginning of the study, Michael read in a very monotone and choppy voice. He often read word by word, or sometimes in short phrases. When he came to a tricky word, he slowed down, which caused some unnatural pauses in his reading. It sounded robotic. He kept on reading without going back to check if it made sense in the sentence. He needed a lot of practice for fluency. His first time reading the readers' theater scripts were a struggle for Michael.

During conferences the teacher-researcher showed Michael the difference of reading in a monotone voice (one voice tone with no inflection), and in a way that included a smooth, expressive flow. She then modeled his part of the script, with an emphasis on reading the text smooth, and paying attention to punctuation. Michael practiced reading it back, "echoing" the teacher-researcher. As Michael worked hard practicing his lines, he felt more comfortable, and made fewer errors. Michael mentioned that the part he enjoyed the most about RT was, "Practicing. If you don't know the words, it makes you know the words". When he met in his group, or with the teacher-researcher, it was evident that he had practiced and often would read it more smoothly than the first time reading it. He became more familiar with the text in each of his scripts after a few times through. Because he was familiar with his lines, he made fewer errors.

As time went on, and the more he practiced for each script, his reading became smoother. His reading began to sound like natural talking. Once he was able to read the text with greater fluency and fewer errors, he worked on adding expression to his reading. The teacher-researcher again modeled his part of the script, this time with an emphasis on expression, and paying attention to the character's feelings. Michael practiced reading it back, "echoing" the teacher-

researcher. He started to read more fluently and he attempted expression on his own. Michael had moments where his expression would be talking really loud in one pitch. This was something that the teacher-researcher had to work on with Michael. It took a lot of echo reading, and practice.

At times, his expression did not match the character's feelings in the story. This took some practice to pay attention to text clues of how the character was feeling throughout the text. The teacher-researcher and Michael would go through each of his parts of the play and talk about how his character was feeling, and the emotion he should have in his voice to match it. This took some time, and he still was not able to do it independently by the end of the study.

When it came time to perform each script of the RT play, Michael got very nervous. He lacked expression in his reading, and often read in a choppy way. He did however, read most of the words accurately. After each performance, not only did the teacher-researcher evaluate how Michael performed, but Michael self-assessed his work. Through the self-assessment process, Michael was reflective of the things with which he felt confident, and the things he knew he could still practice. He knew that expression and fluency were the two areas which needed improvement and circled those areas on his rubric. The teacher-researcher's assessment and Michael's self-assessment did not always align when it came to evaluating his performances. Michael often failed to accurately rate his performances. Michael's confidence about himself as a reader showed some growth. When given the chance to reflect on if he has grown as a reader, Michael stated, "Yes, when it shows a question mark or an excited mark, you need to act excited".

The teacher-researcher saw a more confident reader in Michael during his practice. As far as his performances, it was merely a case of stage fright. Michael demonstrated that he was inconsistent with his smooth, fluent reading and adding expression in his reading to match the character feeling. The teacher-researcher observed he is capable of including fluency and expression in his reading, but he still needed to practice reading fluently independently and with consistency.

Ben

9-year-old Ben loved reading. During reading group, he focused most of the time, and enjoyed having discussions over the book. When it came time for independent reading, he buried himself in his book. He loved all sorts of genres. Often times, Ben had trouble staying focused. He got distracted talking to friends. He was, however, a very hard worker and enjoyed school. Ben was chosen for this study because he was moving towards grade-level expectations.

Ben had some experience in the past of participating in Reader's Theater. He participated in RT a few times in first grade and once in second grade. He understood the process of RT. In the beginning of the study, Ben read in a monotone way, with no expression at all. His first reading of each script was often read word by word, or in short phrases. Other times, his sentences were smooth, but lacked feeling in his words. When he read his lines of the script, he lacked awareness of how the character's felt in the story. He needed practice with fluency, expression, and a focus on character's feelings.

The teacher-researcher met with Ben and talked about his character throughout the script. They practiced Ben's lines together, and discussed how his character felt at each part of the story. Once Ben got a solid understanding of his character, he then went back and re-read his lines with a focus on speaking how the character was feeling. The teacher-researcher used echo reading, a procedure in which she read a part and Ben repeated, using the exact tone and expression of the teacher-researcher. This helped Ben a lot with his reading and led to a focus on adding more expression in his reading. Ben enjoyed this part of Reader's Theater, stating, "I enjoyed that you get to read what the character says".

During the study, the teacher-researcher saw Ben attempting more expression without being reminded to do so, showing this independence. He paid closer attention to the character's feelings, with some help at times. Ben was off task during group practice, which resulted in a performance that lacked expression and feeling. When a student nudged him to help his focus, he rushed through his lines because he realized it was his turn. The teacher-researcher reminded him how important it

was to be fully engaged and focus during practice, so that when he performed it would be his best work.

He handled feedback very well, and worked hard to get better during his independent time and his group practice. He eventually became more focused and engaged in his reading. He included some expression and more fluency in his reading by the time he performed in front of an audience. Ben was very calm when he performed. He made little to no errors, would read at a smooth rate, and included some expression. After the performances, he self-assessed himself. He felt confident in the areas of accuracy and fluency but knew he could still improve his expression.

The teacher-researcher's assessment rubric showed Ben became more aware of his character's feelings and he used some expression to match that in his reading. He also paid attention to punctuation, like bold words and exclamation marks for a dramatic emphasis. The teacher and student's self-assessment rubrics did align more accurately in Ben's case. In the end of the study, Ben showed that he still had room to improve in adding more expression. He worked hard and was open to criticism and feedback. He was more confident in his reading by the end of this study, and was aware of the importance of expression, and smooth reading. When asked if he had grown as a reader, Ben stated, "yes, reading the words right".

Sam

Sam was a very energetic 9-year-old boy who enjoyed reading books. During reading time, he was always on task. He was the student who read out loud, practically yelling because he was into his book. Sam was an ELL (English language learner) student. He liked to talk about his reading during reading group. He was a joyous person, who enjoyed school a lot. Sam was selected for this study because he was moving towards grade level expectations.

Sam had some experience in the past of participating in Reader's Theater. He participated a few times in first and second grade and had a positive experience with the process. At first, Sam read right through punctuation marks in the sentences. He did not stop at periods so his reading

became one long ramble. His first reading through each script was a little fast and in a monotone voice. At times he would include some expression, but not much. Sam needed to focus on paying attention to the punctuation marks, and to include some expression in his voice.

When meeting with the teacher-researcher, Sam practiced slowing down to look at punctuation marks in his reading. The teacher-researcher modeled reading with a focus on appropriate pauses, and appropriate rate of reading (not too fast). Then Sam practiced by echo reading the way the teacher-researcher read the lines. Sam was focused when it was time to practice with his group in addition to independent practice. After time went on, it became clear that Sam worked hard to improve. When the teacher-researcher observed his group, he paused at the appropriate spots, and included more expression at exclamation marks and bold words.

At times with new reader's theater scripts, he had a few errors. After a few days of practice, he increased his fluency while reading his lines, with little to no errors. Sam attempted to add some expression when he read aloud. The teacher-researcher helped Sam to focus on how his character was feeling in the story, and even when he was the narrator, and to pay attention to the feeling at that part of the story. Sam was fond of this part of readers' theater, as he stated, "I like to be the characters".

For the first RT performances, he included some expression, and at times would still read right through punctuation marks. With practice and feedback, Sam showed a lot of improvement in his expression and smooth reading rate. He evaluated himself with confidence in his abilities, mentioning his growth when he stated he liked, "pretending and acting like the characters". He also reflected on things he needed to work on, such as using more expression. For Sam, most of the time his self-assessment rubrics aligned with how the teacher assessed his performances.

By the end of the study, Sam showed real excitement for Reader's Theater and passion about demonstrating the character's feelings. He showed growth in reading at a smooth fluent rate. He also started to focus on punctuation in a text and included expression in his reading to match his

character's feelings or part. Sam was a hard worker and very passionate about improving.

Penny

Penny was vivacious 9-year-old, who enjoyed reading and discussing books. During reading time, she was on task. She read a variety of genres and went through books quickly. Independent time was her favorite. She also enjoyed working in a group setting. She was a very passionate student who enjoyed school. Penny was chosen to participate in this study because she was still working towards grade level reading.

Penny was familiar with Reader's Theater before starting the study. She understood what the process looked like and was excited to try it again. In the beginning of this study, Penny read at a fairly smooth rate after her first time reading through the script. She included some expression but her expression didn't match the feeling of the character in the play. She did not pay attention to punctuation in the text, including bold words or exclamation marks.

During conferences with the teacher-researcher, Penny practiced looking at punctuation in the text. The teacher-researcher modeled the appropriate expression, and Penny echoed it back. She and Penny also worked on paying close attention to how her character was feeling throughout the play, and to match that when she read her lines. She was quick to understand that characters feelings will change, and she matched her voice accordingly. She was a quick learner. All it took was a few reminders, and Penny became very independent as the study went on.

At times, Penny had a few errors monitored while she read and corrected her reading during practice. Once she had several practices completed, she often read her lines with no errors at all. She utilized her independent practice time and was on task with her group as well. The teacher-researcher saw a confidence in Penny's reading. When asked if she had grown as a reader, Penny said, "Yes, the first Reader's Theater was Goldilocks, then as we went on it made me better that I practiced". She was becoming more reflective in her reading. It was clear when it was time to perform. During her performances she would take her role very

seriously. She would read her part smoothly, with no errors, and included great expression in her voice. She really got into the RT plays.

It was evident that Penny showed growth in her fluency. She started to include expression independently, and her emotions matched the feelings of her character. She paid more attention to punctuation, with few reminders. When it came to evaluating, Penny's self-assessments matched up with the teacher's assessment of her performances. Penny really enjoyed this process, and worked hard to be successful in each play. Penny's favorite part of Reader's Theater was, "that we can do it together. If I was just doing it by myself without anybody, I would be so nervous". All of the practice independently, as well as with her classmates, made her become more confident.

Conclusion

Reader's Theater helped students grow in reading fluency. Each student's reading became more fluent throughout the study. Opportunities for students to practice independently, with the teacher-researcher, and with their groups, supported that growth. Practicing oral reading was beneficial throughout the RT process. The student's final performances showed that they made improvements in their ability to smoothly read the text. Feedback from the teacher-researcher on their fluency was helpful for student growth as well. By the end of the study, not all students were independent at this skill, but all students were more aware of their fluency development.

Students' self-assessment was helpful in getting students to become aware of their reading fluency and expression. It was beneficial for students to reflect on their work, without the teacher-researcher telling them how they did. However, data analysis did not support that it was a major factor in student's reading fluency. There would be times when the student's self-assessment rubric did not align with the teacher-researcher's assessment. It was also hard for the students to remember how they did during the performance, to be able to reflect and assess themselves.

Teacher feedback and support had the most influence on student's reading fluency. Students responded best when they were able to see a model of what fluent reading sounded like.

Student's needed support on focusing on character's feeling and using more expression in their voices to match that feeling. The teacher-researcher provided support for readers to become more successful. For each conference time with the teacher-researcher the students reviewed what they worked on the previous time, and that became the focus to lead the next instruction. The teacher-researcher was able to identify the needs of the students and provide the best immediate support during the study.

Fluency is an important aspect of reading. A successful reader should sound smooth, expressive, and read the words accurately at a normal reading rate. Reader's Theater influences student's ability to read more fluently. Repeated reading practice allows students to become more comfortable with the text, getting students to focus on the character's emotions. Vasinda and McLeod (2011) reported that Reader's Theater also "is an important tool that brings authenticity and engagement to the process of repeated readings, resulting in remarkable and measurable comprehension gains".

Reader's Theater is an engaging way to get students excited about improving their reading. It is a purposeful and enjoyable way for students to feel success in reading. "The complexity of the text varies depending on student's independent reading levels and capabilities" (Lewis and Feng, 2014, p.9), so every student has a chance to feel like a confident reader.

Limitations

The teacher-researcher acknowledged that there were limitations to this study. Role duality was difficult when analyzing data. Being in the role of the teacher and the researcher could have impacted the study. It may have been more beneficial to simply be the observer or researcher during the Reader's Theater process. There may have been routine behaviors that the teacher-researcher could have easily overlooked when taking on both roles. For example, because the teacher-researcher was familiar with students' reading abilities, she may have used past data to assess students on their Reader's Theater performances. An outside evaluator might have

provided an alternative view of student's reading performances.

Another limitation was that there may not have been enough data helping to support the research questions. There is always room for more data collection, and more time to do so as well. The teacher-researcher could have used additional ways to track student's reading fluency growth to help in the study than the tools used. Other ways might include the use of video recording for students' self-assessment. Also, a longer time period of the study could have been beneficial. A year long time-frame for this study would be a recommendation. This would allow for additional practice and transfer in students' everyday reading abilities, as well as the use of Reader's Theater in other subject areas.

Suggestions for further research

Educators who have students who struggle with reading fluency and have students who are approaching grade level, may benefit from reading this article. Reader's Theater is a tool to help students who are approaching grade level, improve their reading fluency. Educators should continue the research on the influence that RT has on reading fluency through different grade levels. Primary teachers may find this strategy helpful when intervening early on student's reading fluency.

Incorporating the self-assessment rubric for students helped them become more aware and alert to their learning. It was a tool that helped students take ownership of their reading progress. However, it was not the most effective when it came to fluency growth. Educators are encouraged to continue to find better ways for students to be more engaged in the self-assessment process, particularly, how it will help student's reading fluency.

Use of technology could deem to be helpful in making the Reader's Theater process more engaging for students in the future. Students may benefit from hearing themselves practice or perform their scripts. There may be other technology tools or apps that help enhance this study for future research as well.

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