

Assisting a Struggling Turkish Student with a Repeated Reading Fluency Intervention

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important aims of teaching reading is to help students acquire fluent reading skills. With this aim in mind, this study attempted to support a student with difficulty to become a fluent reader by improving his reading skills using a fluency instruction method called repeated reading. This study was performed with an elementary school student experiencing reading difficulty in Turkey's Kirsehir province in the spring semester of the academic year. The study continued for about 10 weeks and had positive improvements on the student's reading comprehension, automaticity and accuracy skills. The views of the student's parents and class teacher also supported these improvements.

INTRODUCTION

A major role of a student is to learn how to read and write, because reading and writing represent essential skills. Being literate has many undeniable contributions to our daily lives. It not only enables people to act independently, have stronger relationships, develop the necessary self-esteem but also helps the individual to become a fully functioning educated member of society. (Rizopoulos & Wolpert, 2004).

According to National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) (2006), proficient reading process is defined as to extend meaning from what is read by making inferences, drawing conclusions, and making connections to their own experiences. Perfetti, Landi, and Oakhill (2005) noted that there are numerous reasons why many students have difficulty achieving proficient reading skills, which requires students to read fluency and understand what they read. There are some skills that must be acquired in order to be a good reader. These skills include phonemic awareness, proficiency in phonics, fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension (Chafouleas, Martens, Dobson, Weinstein, & Gardner, 2004; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Therrien, 2004; Therrien, Wickstrom, & Jones, 2006). The lack of one of these skills may lead to unsuccessful reading.

The acquisition of reading skills is very difficult for some children. The reader is required to decode as they read which involves transforming the letters into related sounds, sounds into

syllables and then into words. Thus, the person who has just started reading for the first time should be aware of the phonetic structure of the words in language and then understand arrangements of the letters representing the sounds. The child who has difficulty reading and understanding may be unable to decode adequately, use grammar correctly, and use vocabulary. (Snowling, Hulme, & Goulandris, 1994; Snowling, Nation, & Moxham, 1997). Recognizing symbols related to sounds, distinguishing them (phonological awareness) and identifying and pronouncing symbols affect speed, accuracy and comprehension in reading (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). Students with reading difficulties are also less likely to read fluently.

Studies have shown that students who have reading difficulties due to disabilities are able to learn to read and write in spite of presenting delays in their development. These students may need more time, attention and resources (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [NJCLD], 1993). Many techniques related to remediating reading difficulties have been developed and many school-based studies aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of these techniques have been carried out. Some of the key techniques are repeated reading, group-based reading, passage previewing, shared book reading, paired reading, practicing words in isolation and phrase-drill error correction (Begeny & Martens 2006; Daly, Martens, Dool, & Hintze, 1998; Devault & Joseph, 2004; Nes, 2003; O'Shea, Sindelar, & O'Shea, 1985; Rasinski, 1990; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Kouzekanani, Bryant, Dickson, & Blozis, 2003; Welsch, 2006).

In a study by Alber-Morgan, Ramp, Anderson, and Martin (2007), the effects of the repeated reading technique on reading fluency and comprehension were investigated and student opinions were gathered about this method. Students stated that they enjoyed working with this method, that they could correct their own mistakes while reading, that they started reading better, that they enjoyed working by themselves and did not have difficulty tackling the reading texts when using repeated reading. Similarly, Wright and Mullan (2006) studied the effects of the repeated reading technique on reading fluency of students with reading difficulties. Qualitative data from interviews with parents and teachers showed that they viewed the repeated reading work undertaken as supporting reading skills. They also noted a substantial improvement in students' reading attitudes, reading motivation and desire to read independently.

Yilmaz and Koksall (2008) investigated the effects of the repeated reading technique on the development of primary third graders' reading comprehension skills in Turkey. As a result of a three-month study using the repeated reading technique, a significant increase was observed in students' reading comprehension skills.

Oral Reading and the Method of Repeated Reading

One of the most efficient ways to increase reading proficiency is through reading fluency (NICHD, 2000; Therrien, 2004). Reading fluency is a skill defined as accurately reading words at a fast pace with the appropriate prosody (expression) (Hudson et al., 2005; NICHD, 2000). "Reading fluency refers to the ability of readers to read quickly, effortlessly, and efficiently with good, meaningful expression" (Rasinski, 2003, p. 26). Disfluent students are inefficient in recognizing words quickly and in comprehending what they read. Moreover, these students lack motivation and spend less time reading (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Mastropieri, Leinart, & Scruggs, 1999; Stanovich, 1986).

A promising method for improving reading fluency is the repeated reading technique. In repeated reading, a student is asked to read one text several times in order to improve word

recognition, fluency, and comprehension (Devault & Joseph, 2004). Samuels (1979) defines repeated reading as the student's reading the text until he/she reaches reading fluency and repeating this process on a new text. Researchers have pointed out that students can easily implement reading skills which they acquired from a text with use of repeated readings and through this technique, students can easily read increasingly difficult texts (Devault & Joseph, 2004; Freeland, Skinner, Jackson, McDaniel, & Smith, 2000; Kann, 2001; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Rasinski, 2003; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Therrien & Kubina, 2006).

Repeated readings helps to increase accuracy and automaticity in word recognition, and when the focus is placed on reading with appropriate and meaningful expression, prosody and comprehension can also be improved (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Mastropieri et al., 1999; Moskal, 2006; Nelson, Alber, & Gordy, 2004; Therrien, 2004). The method is also simple to learn and implement, and can be used with existing instructional materials, thus making it an ideal intervention in Turkey where teachers are not well trained in reading and reading materials and materials for instruction are relatively scarce. As a result of these findings from previous research, the general aim of the present study was to improve the reading fluency skills and comprehension of a struggling Turkish elementary student by using the repeated reading technique.

METHOD

Participant

The study was performed on a second grade student at a public primary school of a middle socio-economic level in the center of Kirsehir province, Turkey. The student had poor reading fluency and reading comprehension in comparison to his peers and grade level indicators. In working with the student, both the student's parents and teacher's evaluations noted that the student displayed several behaviors that negatively impacted his reading ability including an attention deficit and low self-esteem. He was found to be reading at a first grade instructional reading level. While reading, he followed using his finger, read at an excessively slow pace, gave long intervals between words, could not recognize many words and as a result read inaccurately. He was also found to be below grade level in reading comprehension, as he was not able to read in high volume, and did not have smooth expression and mixed the phonemes (b-p, m-n, s-ş, b-d, c-ç, g-ğ) during reading. An adapted informal reading inventory was used in data collection and data analysis. Additionally, reactions from the student's parents and class teacher regarding this intervention program were received at the end of the study.

Procedure and Materials

After identifying the school for the study, permissions were gained from the required authorities and an appropriate student was sought to perform the study on. Mertcan (pseudonym), a 2nd grade student, was chosen. The student's class teacher was consulted and the teacher stated that the student was significantly below grade level in reading and that he did not have any physical or mental disabilities.

Mertcan's reading performance was assessed using an informal reading inventory. After giving Mertcan an opportunity to read several passages at different grade levels, it was

determined that he had difficulty in decoding, reading fluency (with appropriate speed and prosody), and with reading comprehension (Mertcan made 18 reading errors on a second grade text of 105 words (83% word recognition; frustration level). Reading comprehension was measured through a set of literal and inferential questions that followed the passage reading (Mertcan scored 54% on reading comprehension).

Repeated readings with the student began during the first week of March and continued through the second week of May (10 weeks). To establish inter-rater reliability, two researchers (first and second authors) independently scored the informal reading inventory both at the beginning of study and at the end of the study. Inter-rater reliability was determined as .92 in the pretesting and .95 for the posttesting.

In order to provide triangulation, meetings were held and interviews were conducted with the student's parents and class teacher about the practices implemented during the intervention program. At the meetings repeated reading was discussed as well as the improvement made by the student in his reading skills. Meetings with the class teacher and parents were not organized to collect data but to inform them about the work undertaken with the student.

Approximately 33 hours of repeated reading practice were carried out with the student. Instructional sessions lasted 40 minutes, five days in a week

Ten texts from first grade (Aldi et al., 2006; <http://ttkb.meb.gov.tr>) and 15 texts from second grade (<http://ttkb.meb.gov.tr>; Karafilik, Degirmenci, & Bilkan, 2006) were chosen for the study. After finishing the first grade texts, second grade texts were used with Mertcan.

Repeated Reading Sessions

Repeated reading sessions were conducted outside of Mertcan's regular classroom. Prior to each session, a consent was obtained consent from Mertcan's classroom teacher to study with Mertcan out of classroom. Sessions were carried out in the student's school, in a silent and empty classroom separate from his regular classroom. Every session was conducted with participation of the tutor that lasted 40 minutes in weekday from March to middle of May (10 weeks-50 days). Mertcan's parents and classroom teacher also were involved in some sessions to observe the intervention procedures employed.

The repeated reading session conducted with Mertcan consisted of rereading a short, meaningful text several times until a satisfactory level of fluency was achieved. Then the procedure was repeated with a new text. At times, one text was studied in two sessions until Mertcan could master the passage.

Mertcan read all the words in the text during the every repeated reading. The intervention tutor (first author) provided assistance by modeling the text for Mertcan, reading the passage with Mertcan, providing Mertcan with different purposes for rereading the passage, and providing instruction on words that were read incorrectly. When Mertcan was able to read a passage well, he was asked two literal and three inferential comprehension questions related to text. These were used in order to assess Mertcan's comprehension of the text.

At the end of the study unstructured interviews were conducted with the parents and the class teacher. No feedback was given about the last performance of the student until the end of the interviews to the student's parents and the class teacher so that they would not be affected in any way.

RESULTS

Prior to the beginning of the repeated reading intervention Mertcan's reading was assessed using a modified informal reading inventory. He was asked to read a second grade passage orally; his reading was followed by a set of literal and inferential questions about the passage he had just read. Mertcan's word recognition accuracy score was calculated to be 83% and his comprehension score was 54%.

At the end of the study, following the repeated reading intervention, Mertcan's reading was again assessed using similar procedures on a different but equivalent second grade passage. On this posttest Mertcan was found to read with 98% word recognition accuracy, and he scored 100% on the literal and inferential comprehension questions he was asked following the reading. Thus, Mertcan's performance on a "cold" reading of a grade level passage improved from 83% to 98% on word recognition accuracy and from 54% to 100% on comprehension as a result of 33.3 hours of repeated reading instruction (in 40 minute segments) over the course of ten weeks. Essentially, Mertcan's reading improved from second grade frustration to second grade independent level reading in 33 hours of repeated reading instruction.

Findings Obtained from Unstructured Interviews

The parents' and the class teacher's opinions supported the data obtained that repeated reading increased Mertcan's reading fluency. The student's parents and the class teacher indicated that the student's motivation for reading had increased, he gained self-confidence and, moreover, they observed that he had great improvements while reading independently. Additionally, the class teacher noted that at the beginning of the study he did not believe that this program would eliminate the reading problem of the student. However after observing the student within the classroom context he had to concur that repeated reading had been successful. He also noted that the student would be more prepared in case he meets these kinds of problems in the future and he would improve his learning difficulties and find ways of overcoming these difficulties.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of repeated readings on the struggling Turkish reader. The researchers of this study attempted to determine the impact that repeated readings would have on the student's reading fluency and reading comprehension. The data obtained provided a strong support for the efficiency and effectiveness of repeated readings in improving reading fluency and comprehension skills.

This student was well below his assigned grade level in reading before participating in the repeated readings intervention. However, he could read and comprehend texts of his grade level fluently, accurately, and independently as a result of the repeated reading technique by the end of this study. Moreover, the parents' and class teacher's opinions of the student supported that the repeated reading technique is one of the most effective ways to assist students who are behind their grade level in reading fluency increase these skills. In the light of these findings it may be said that the repeated reading technique improves reading fluency as well as assisting reading comprehension.

Most researchers argue that children must have fluent reading skills in order to be successful at school. However, many researchers also note that a great number of students do not read with appropriate fluency. Researchers note that reading difficulties in children start at a very early age and continue throughout their school lives. Students with reading difficulties cannot benefit adequately from any text they read. This process should be prevented by taking different measures (focusing on grade levels, composing compensatory curriculums, extra activities out of school) before it leads to bigger problems (e.g., Savage & Carless, 2005; NICHD, 2000; Nichols, Rupley, & Rasinski, 2009; Rasinski, 2010; Rasinski, Samuels, Hiebert, Pestcher, & Feller, 2011).

Results obtained from research using fluent reading techniques have demonstrated that factors such as providing students with texts at their own education level, presenting multiple opportunities for repeated practices, correcting the errors and controlling the progress process of students, play an important role in improving fluent reading skills (Alber-Morgan et al., 2007; Rasinski, Padak, & Fawcet, 2010; Valleley & Shriver, 2003; Wheldall, 2000). This research also demonstrated that the repeated reading technique increased correct and fluent reading and improved reading comprehension skills for a Turkish student experiencing reading difficulties.

We recognize that having a student read a text repeatedly can have a negative impact on his or her motivation to read. The intervention tutor worked to keep the student's interest high by providing purposes for reading, modeling the text, and reading the text with the student. Perhaps the most significant motivation came from the student, parents, and teacher noting the progress he was making in his reading. Prior to the implementation of the repeated reading intervention Merctan had made minimal progress in reading. During the ten weeks of the intervention, his progress was of sufficient substance that he was now able to read grade level texts independently and with good comprehension. Self-awareness of progress made where progress previously was painfully slow can be a strong motivation to engage in an activity such as repeated reading.

Reading fluency serves as a bridge between word recognition and reading comprehension. Readers who have fluent reading skills focus their attention on the main idea of the text, and do not need to spend an inordinate amount of time decoding unfamiliar words in the text. They make connections between ideas in the text and their own ideas. In other words, they use their word recognition and reading comprehension skills simultaneously. As a result of this, they would not be able to deduce the meaning which the author wants to present to them (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Limon-Thompson, 2011). In this direction, educators have a great responsibility in bringing in these skills to the students who are deficient in terms of reading skills.

A review of the literature in Turkey reveals that there are very few studies about struggling readers (e.g., Yilmaz & Koksall, 2008). Turkey does not have reading specialists who can help struggling readers in schools. Teachers in Turkey do not have enough information, adequate skills, and essential vision how to diagnose these children with reading difficulties, how to solve these problems, how to teach essential reading strategies, and so forth. Turkey does not have enough assessment tools to determine children's reading problems and we have very few scholars doing research on these problems. Crowded classrooms in schools in Turkey are another reason not to be able to help struggling readers.

Turkish schools do not have enough materials and technology for struggling readers' needs. Programs applied in Turkish schools do not include certain diagnosing and remedial strategies for struggling readers. Programs applied for training teacher trainees in Turkish universities (teacher education/higher education) do not include detailed information struggling

readers' needs. When pre-service teachers, particularly elementary school teachers graduate, they are not familiar with how to help struggling readers in their classrooms.

Because some of Turkish parents are illiterate, they do not know how to help their children who are struggling readers and literate Turkish parents also do not have enough information on how to help their children who are struggling readers. Because of these reasons, Turkish parents cannot support their children's readings, and they cannot support school personnel adequately.

Repeated reading is a simple technique that can be easily and quickly taught to teachers and parents using materials that are already available in schools and homes. As this study suggests, repeated readings holds the potential for helping students make significant progress in reading. The Turkish education system has substantial difficulties when it comes to helping struggling readers. This current study provides evidence that Turkish teachers, parents, scholars and educators can help struggling readers through a simple technique called repeated readings.

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