



Comedy Hour: Using Audio Files of Joke Recitations to Improve Elementary Students' Fluency

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The purpose of this action research study was to measure changes in fluency components in three struggling readers. The researchers sought to increase oral fluency and confidence in order to improve reading skills among struggling readers. Intervention strategies were implemented over a span of four weeks in a second grade classroom. Strategies included teacher modeling, self-rehearsal, and audiotape analysis. Automaticity and prosody in initial audio recordings of joke recitations were compared to the final readings of the same jokes. Progress was also monitored by students' engagement in a class-wide weekly performance to present their jokes to peers. Results of this study indicated an increase in automaticity and prosody as well as an increase in confidence in oral reading.

Keywords: fluency, technology, elementary, self-assessment, media files

Fluency is a vital component for success in core subject areas, as students' reading abilities impact academics beyond literacy and language arts. However, when teachers listen to a student read, how do they determine whether the student is "fluent"? In the vernacular, one might state that "the fluent reader sounds good, is easy to listen to, and reads with enough expression to help the listener understand and enjoy the material" (Clark, 1999, p. 19). A more formal definition is provided by Kuhn and Stahl (2003), who state that "the primary components of fluency include a) accuracy in decoding, b) automaticity in word recognition, and c) the appropriate use of prosodic features such as stress, pitch, and appropriate phrasing" (p. 5). Students who can decode words with accuracy are ready for the next two components of fluency as outlined by Kuhn and Stahl: automaticity and prosody.

Samuels (1988) states that developing automaticity with reading is similar to strategies employed with sports and hobbies: teachers must provide instruction, provide time to practice, and motivate students to stay on task. Prosody, however, is more elusive to quantify progress.

This research was modeled on work by Ness (2009), in which students' fluency was positively impacted through the implementation of jokes into daily individualized instruction. Ness selected joke delivery to increase fluency because of the reliance of joke delivery on prosodic features such as expression. This study aimed to explore the extent to which repeated joke recitation and the use of technology for recording initial and final readings impacted elementary students' fluency, specifically the components of automaticity and prosody, and impacted their confidence in oral reading.

Literature Review

Fluency is not definitively bound by one single definition; however, fundamental characteristics include the ability of a student to read “smoothly, accurately, and with expression” (Conderman & Strobel, 2008, p. 15). A fluent reader is one who can read with “speed and effort-lessness,” and is often tied to understanding, or comprehension of the text (Hasbrouck, Ihnot, & Rogers, 1999, p. 27). While a student’s progress in reading is typically focused on the pace at which he or she reads (automaticity), it is also essential to focus on improving students’ prosody (Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009).

Prosody

Prosody is defined as the ability of students to make words read aloud mirror the spoken sounds (language) they hear and speak every day (Rasinski et al., 2009, p. 351). Prosody also focuses on additional aspects within a text that include rhythm, pitch or intonation, tempo and rhythm. According to Ness (2009), prosody in students’ reading is often overlooked because of its subjective nature as opposed to the quantifiable attributes of automaticity and accuracy.

Modeling prosody in reading goes hand-in-hand with increasing fluency; such reading demonstrates to students the flow and expression of fluent readers (Welsch, 2006). A significant difference exists between merely reading texts and actively engaging in or rehearsing text. In a study of first graders, Rasinski (2006) evaluated the gains in reading rate as a result of using expression in students rehearsing poetry with their parents at night, versus simply reading the poetry without rehearsal or practice with their parents. Rasinski stated that the critical objective of teaching students to read is to focus more time on prosody instruction in order to see gains in accuracy, automaticity, and ultimately comprehension of text.

Research by Ness (2009) supports the development of expressive readers through the use of joke books. In her research, fluency instruction was taught through one-on-one methods to increase the elementary student’s application of stress and inflection, or tone, during oral readings. The use of joke recitations for fluency instruction proved to be significantly beneficial, primarily because effective joke-telling relies on more than just saying words aloud; the phrasing, stress, and emphases on words all affect the humor (Ness, 2009).

Targeting fluency instruction: Repeated reading

Repeated reading is an effective strategy for promoting automaticity and prosody. According to Wilfong (2008), repeated reading is a strategy in which “a piece of text is read and reread to build fluency, confidence, and comprehension in students” (p. 4). Over thirty years of research findings have shown that repeated readings of text increase students’ overall reading rate (Conderman & Strobel, 2008). Teachers play a vital role in repeated readings by providing feedback to students in order to point out areas that may need improvement in reading, providing

praise, and providing directions for students to read with expression. Samuels (1988) and Rasinski (2005) both liken the role of the reading teacher to that of an athletic coach who motivates, provides instruction, and provides opportunities for practice.

The genre of poetry lends itself well to repeated readings. Research by Wilfong (2008) assessed the extent to which poetry increased fluency and yielded positive attitudes and motivation in below-level third grade students during a “Poetry Academy.” Students were asked to read selected poems aloud while listeners provided assistance and praise. Significant gains were found in WCPM and word recognition as a result of strategies such as the repeated readings. Poetry recitations are effective not only for below-level students. Burton-Szabo (1996) encourages the inclusion of poetry units with gifted middle school students, and poetry reading was found to encourage more active participation by elementary students when compared with story reading (Elster & Hanauer, 2002).

Methods

The focus of this action research study was to determine the effect of repeated joke recitations on the participants’ automaticity and prosody, and to enhance their confidence in oral reading. This study spanned over a period of four consecutive weeks in Spring 2010 at a suburban elementary school in the southeastern United States. The school consisted of over 1,000 students Pre-K-5th grade.

Participants

Participants in the study were two males and one female in a 2nd grade classroom. The participants for this study were purposefully selected based on their calculated words correct per minute (WCPM) collected from running records during the first half of the school year. Their WCMP were lower than the other students in the classroom, and therefore they were targeted for additional practice with oral reading. The researcher had extensive individualized reading instruction with two of the three students. She was well acquainted with their ability levels in regards to expression, timing, attention to punctuation, and the overall rate at which the students read in an informal class setting. The researcher collected baseline fluency rate data through grade-level fluency assessments and determined that additional intervention for these three students was needed. The targeted outcomes of the intervention were to increase automaticity and prosody through effectively conveying the humor in recited jokes and to build participants’ confidence with oral reading.

Procedure

The daily reading block routine for all students modeled the “Daily Five” (Boushey & Moser, 2006) which consisted of 1) reading to someone, 2) reading to self, 3) word work, 4) listening to reading, and 5) writing work. The three participants continued this routine with slight modifications that were explained to them by the researcher prior to intervention. During the four-week intervention, the

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three participants read only joke books to their reading buddy during their "read to someone" and "read to self" times, which consisted of approximately fifteen minutes for each rotation. Joke books used in the study were 101 School Jokes (Eisenberg & Hall, 1987), Knock Knock Jokes (Fremont, 1998), 101 Valentine Jokes (Brigandi, 1994), and the Best Joke Book Ever (Keller, 1998). These books were selected based on their reading or instructional level, vocabulary, and sentence structure.

For four days a week, each of the three participating students received individualized direct instruction from the researcher. The duration of the direct instruction was ten minutes during the allotted core extension block of the day. The direct instruction consisted of a sequence of strategies. First, the student read a designated joke aloud to the researcher while his/her voice was recorded. The researcher then asked the student what the meaning or humor was behind the joke to assess for comprehension. The researcher made notes pertaining to word emphasis, timing, and expression. Next, the researcher provided direct instruction to explain how the

student could have used his/her voice as an instrument to improve the joke's humor. Specific aspects of the student's delivery of the joke included pointing out correct pauses for punctuation as well as the purpose that the question marks, commas, periods, and exclamation marks possessed in the joke's overall meaning. After instruction was given, the researcher modeled a fluid and expressive delivery of the joke while the student listened. The researcher then asked for the student to provide feedback for the researcher on the difference between his/her first delivery and the researcher's. This model was followed by choral and echo reading of the same joke in order to re-read with the student. After the researcher provided a model and guided practice, the researcher recorded the student's second solo delivery of the joke. This audio recording was played back for both the student and researcher to analyze and discuss any differences. The researcher then provided each student with a copy of the joke of the day to write in a joke book folder (see Figure 1). This allowed students to keep track of all of their jokes for the week and practice at home and with classmates.

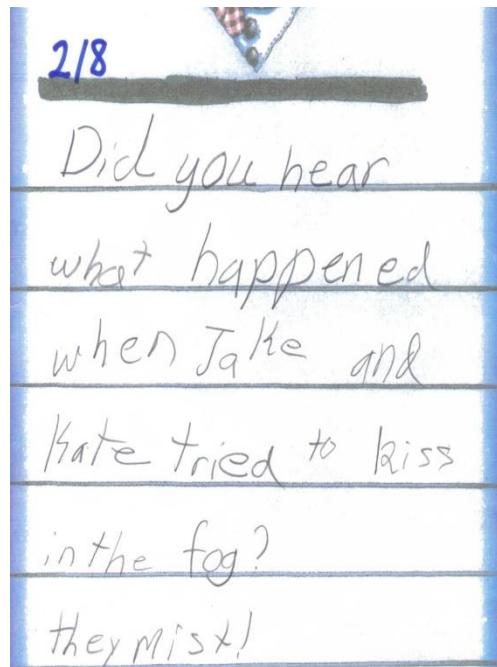


Figure 1. Participant 3's recited joke.

At the end of each week, students participating in the intervention were given the opportunity to share the jokes they practiced all week with their peers during “Comedy Hour” on Friday afternoons. Students who did not participate in this study were also given the opportunity to perform as comedians for their classmates on a bi-weekly basis but were not given direct instruction that the three participants received. The researcher noted aspects such as facial expressions during the performance and verbal indications of excitement about performing to monitor the confidence level of each of the three participants.

At the end of the four-week intervention, the students were asked to re-read all of the jokes they had recorded in their joke book folders. A total of sixteen jokes were recorded initially and after the intervention. The purpose of the recordings was two-fold. All recordings were timed, thereby providing data for changes in automaticity. Secondly, the recordings allowed both the researcher and students to capture the prosodic nature of each reading. Both the researcher and participants could listen for elements such as expression and pacing.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of each participant’s initial readings of all 16 jokes were compared with recordings of final readings of each joke after the four-week intervention. The researcher used the recorded audio files to determine changes in automaticity and prosody. Gains in automaticity were determined by duration of time to read each joke. Gains in prosody were determined by comparing the expression, phrasing, and intonation of the initial and final joke recitations. Changes in confidence levels were determined by observational notes pertaining to the willingness of participants to perform in each week’s Comedy Hour. Aspects that were noted during observations included verbal requests anticipating the performances and facial expressions during each performance.

Results

The researcher recorded the three students’ initial readings of all 16 jokes and final readings four weeks afterwards. Reading durations were recorded in seconds, with results varying according to the length and vocabulary difficulty depending on the joke. Each participant was assigned a different joke based on varying reading levels in order to differentiate instruction. The three participants showed a decrease in reading time durations on all 16 jokes. The decreased reading time was a reflection of the students increase in automaticity and accuracy, as well as a decrease in pausing techniques (for example, clearing one’s throat). All three participants demonstrated an increase in prosody as indicated by their effective comedic expression through phrasing and pitch in the final reading of each joke. Participants’ confidence levels also increased during the intervention. Below is a brief description of each participant’s progress.

Participant 1

At the start of the intervention Participant 1 possessed little interest in reading, possibly due to the fact that he was significantly below grade-level according to baseline data. In the initial readings, when he came to a word he did not know, he simply stopped reading to wait for assistance from the researcher. He made no attempt to sound out the word or skip over it to continue reading, as indicated by the initial reading in the audio recording. By the end of the intervention, however, the participant made an effort the majority of the time to either try to pronounce the word or skip over it. See Figure 2 for Participant 1’s initial and final recording times. The most substantial gain represented in this graph is at Joke #9 (nearly half-way through intervention) at which the participant had an initial read time of 54.2 seconds and a rehearsed time of 5.8 seconds. Participant 1’s confidence in reading increased, as noted by his anticipation for telling his rehearsed jokes during Comedy Hour. The positive feedback from peers was derived in part from his effective delivery of the jokes, indicating an increase in prosody.

Participant 2

Participant 2 struggled with acknowledging proper pauses at commas and punctuation marks. He habitually cleared his throat when he came to word he did not know or could not pronounce. This is clearly audible in the initial recording of the joke included here. After the student read the first joke, the researcher explained the importance of skipping over a word he did not know without clearing his throat, and to come back to that word after he completed reading the rest of the sentence to check for understanding. Discussing the meaning of each joke enabled the student to recognize when to use expression and assisted him with gaining more confidence in reading. Similar trends were found for Participant 2 in relation to Participant 1’s automaticity in terms of initial and final recording times (see Figure 3).

Based on observational notes from the joke recitations over the course of the intervention, this student made noteworthy gains in using expression, emphasizing exclamation and question marks, and discontinuation of clearing his throat when he came to an unfamiliar word.

Participant 3

Participant 3 typically had limited expression and insufficient attention to punctuation marks in initial readings. After engaging in one-on-one discussions and rehearsals, this student was able to make gains in expression as well as accuracy. See Figure 4 for Participant 3’s initial and final recording times for reading. The largest difference was with Joke #6, in which the student had a difference of 27.2 seconds between initial and final readings. The least change was noted in Joke #7 with a marginal difference of .093 seconds.

Improvements were not only in automaticity but also with prosody. An audio recording of this participant’s initial and final reading of one joke is included to

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demonstrate the difference in WCPM and prosody between the initial and final recordings. The audio file includes the participant's initial and final reading of the following joke: "Did you hear what happened when Jake and Kate tried to

kiss in the fog? They 'mist'!" On the initial recording, there are inaccurate words, repeated words, pauses, and flat expression. On the final recording, there is notable expression, effective pausing, and accuracy of words.

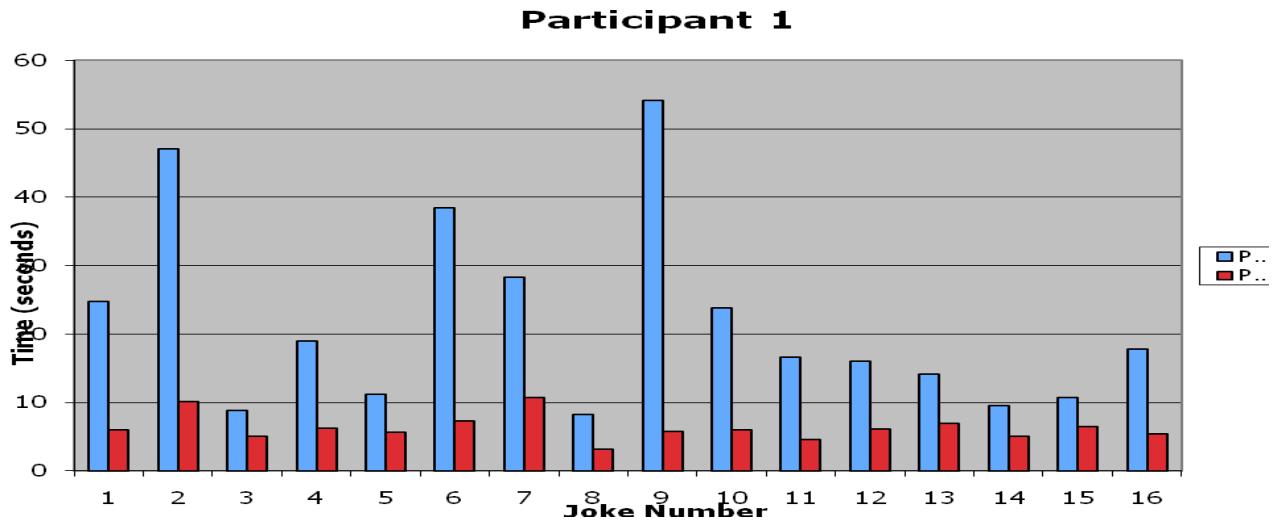


Figure 2. Participant 1's initial (blue) and final (red) recording time for each joke.

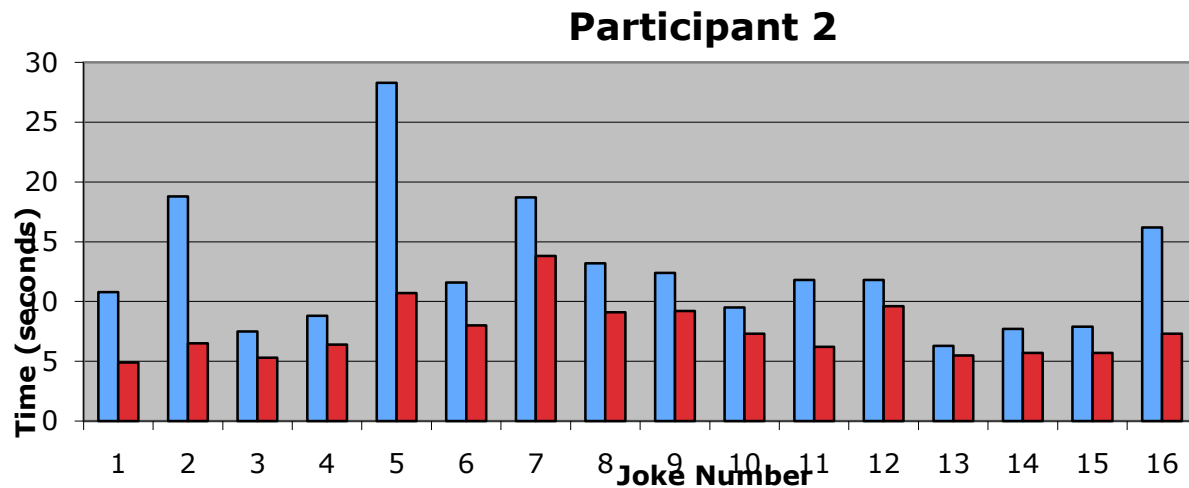


Figure 3. Participant 2's initial (blue) and final (red) recording time for each joke.

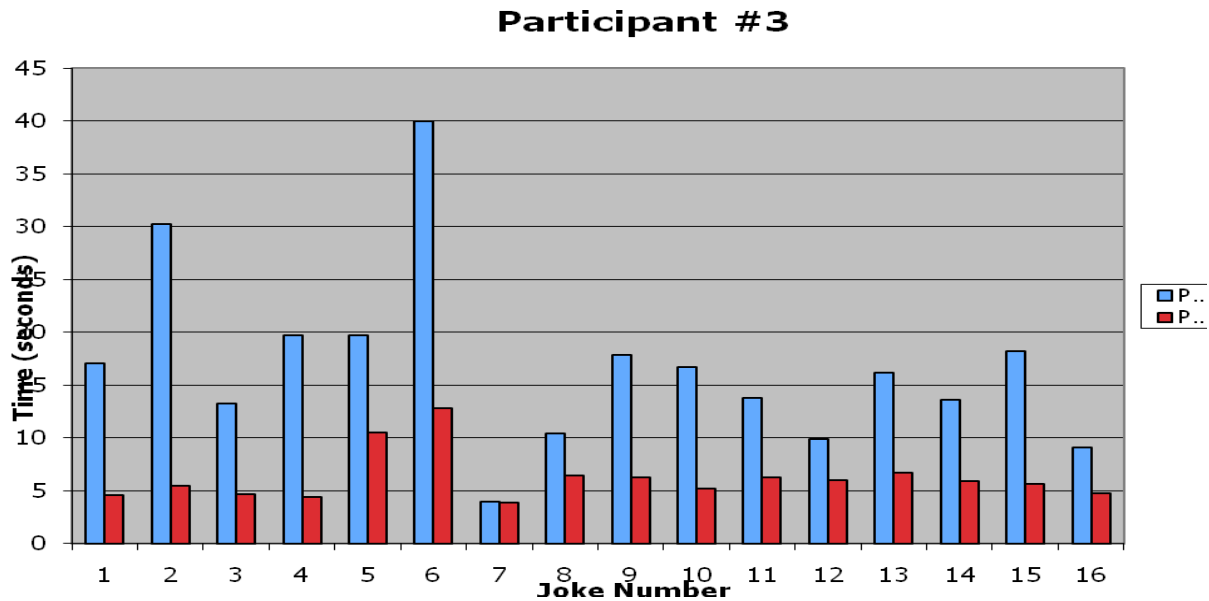


Figure 4. Participant 3’s initial (blue) and final (red) recording time for each joke.

Discussion

Implementing the instructional model suggested by Samuels (1988), the researcher provided direct instruction, incorporated additional time for practicing repeated readings, and created a supportive environment to motivate the three participants as they focused on improving their automaticity, prosody and confidence. The time differences between initial and final recordings indicated that students’ automaticity increased. Prosody was also improved, supporting Ness’s (2009) research incorporating jokes for reading instruction. The use of audiotaping was a key strategy for students. They were able to self-assess their progress with reciting the jokes as they attempted to read them in a manner that conveyed the humor through comedic elements such as expression and pacing. While listening to their recordings, students could note the places where a pauses or inflections were needed. Using technology to support struggling readers was not only effective but also motivating; the participants demonstrated excitement each time they used the teacher’s computer to record their jokes.

The researcher found that assigning students different jokes enabled them take ownership of reading their jokes aloud to the class. The participants visibly enjoyed taking center stage in front of their peers to rehearse their jokes each week. They knew it was their responsibility to rehearse their jokes to perform for Comedy Hour. All three participants anticipated Comedy Hour each week and repeatedly asked when it would occur throughout the day, which led the researcher to conclude that they were all genuinely interested in performing their jokes in front of the class. When the researcher asked a participant to deliver his or her jokes to the class, each one had a visible

expression of happiness (such as smiling). They clearly enjoyed the opportunity to present their jokes in front of an audience.

Through this study, the researcher discerned that the intervention provided the participants with a motivating instructional mode for improving their automaticity, prosody and confidence. Although only three students were targeted for the intervention, other students in the class benefited as well. The effects of implementing this study resulted in class-wide interest in reading jokes to fellow peers during the “read-to-someone” time during the reading block. “Comedy Hour” was a time of the day on Fridays that all students eagerly anticipated.

Limitations of the study include the short duration of the intervention and the small number of participants. Conducting action research is somewhat of a moving target, as the fluid nature of elementary school schedules often interfered with anticipated intervention events. Implementing the strategies for a longer time would have strengthened the study. Additionally, this study focused only on lower-achieving second grade students and therefore cannot be generalized to other reading levels or grade levels. Areas for future research include conducting the intervention with average and high readers, and incorporating other genres that rely heavily on prosody, such as poetry, for recitations.

In conclusion, results of this study suggest that the inclusion of joke telling in reading lessons can be a positive addition to more traditional print resources, particularly when teachers are attempting to note gains in prosody. As noted by Ness (2009), while elements of accuracy and automaticity are quantifiable measures that are easily obtained through assessments formats such as running

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records, the features of prosody are more subjective. Analyzing audio recordings of readings of text is one strategy that teachers and students can use to note improvements in prosody. Students can compare files of initial readings and those made after direct instruction and practice time have been provided. Although the changes are not quantifiable in the manner of accuracy and automaticity, prosodic aspects such as expression, inflection, and phrasing of text is discernable upon listening to the recordings. Jokes, in particular, are an effective resource for providing instruction in the nuance-based feature of prosody because the humor is connected in part to the delivery. Plainly stated, jokes don't "work" if they are told in a manner devoid of prosody, and most students know the difference between a poorly told joke and a humorous one. Students often share jokes outside the context of school, and therefore are already familiar with comedic expression and pacing. Capitalizing on students' interest in jokes to improve automaticity, prosody and oral reading confidence was successful in this action research study, and future research may indicate its success with older students as well.

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Article Citation

Mitchell, E., Rearden, K.T., & Stacey, D. (2011). Comedy hour: Using audio files of joke recitations to improve elementary students' fluency. *Current Issues in Education, 14(2)*. Retrieved [date], from <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/651>

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Volume 14, Number 2

July 31, 2011

ISSN 1099-839X

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