

# Outcomes of a Readers' Theatre Program on Oral Reading Prosody: An Exploratory Study in Different Environments\*

Natalia Ferrada Quezada<sup>a</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> **Correspondance Details:** Natalia Ferrada Quezada, Facultad de Educación, Universidad de Las Américas, Santiago, Chile.  
E-mail: nferrada@udla.cl  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9910-0217>

## Abstract

Readers' theatre is a teaching strategy that consists of the interpretative reading of theatrical texts in which readers use their voices to give life to the characters. This strategy promotes the development of various skills related to fluency, among which there is prosody. This research aimed to check the efficacy of a reader's theatre program on the prosody of oral reading. Eleven dyslexic students from the third and fourth grade of the primary school participated in this study, and who were distributed in two groups. To check the program effectiveness, a program evaluation method was used following the CIIP model and a pre-experimental pre-test post-test design. As a dependent variable, prosody and the prosodic characteristics were used and measured through the Prosody Assessment Scale. Findings showed a significant prosody improvement as well as the prosodic features. In addition, the results obtained by the program were similar in both groups of students. These findings suggest the readers' theatre is an effective strategy for improving the prosody of reading in schoolchildren of those ages and confirm that this strategy can be used as a part of an integral program for fluency development.

## Keywords:

Dyslexia, Prosody, Repeated Reading, Readers' Theatre

## Introduction

Reading fluency is often considered a synonym of reading speed (Young et al., 2020). However, this skill involves much more than the number of words a student can read. Reading fluency is defined as the ability to read a text without much effort, that is, read it without making mistakes, automatically and with the right expression (Kuhn et al., 2010; Paige et al., 2012). Accuracy, automaticity, and prosody are the crucial components that must be present so that the process of reading is fluent, and facilitates the understanding of the texts. One of the main reasons to give more importance to reading fluency is its link with understanding (Álvarez-Cañizo et al., 2015; Calet et al., 2015; Dowhower, 1991; Fuchs



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et al., 2001; Klauda & Guthrie, 2008; Kuhn et al., 2010). Nevertheless, despite the importance that has been given to fluency in the last decade, even when talking about reading competence in general, prosody remains the most forgotten element of the skills that make up reading fluency.

Prosody is the part of phonology in charge of studying phonic or suprasegmental phenomena (Cortés, 2002). Prosody can be described as a linguistic term that refers to the rhythmic and tonal aspects of speech (Dowhower, 1991; Hudson et al., 2005) or oral language music (Kuhn et al., 2010). The prosodic features include volume, rhythm, intonation, phrasing and pausing when reading aloud.

Intonation is a linguistic and phonological phenomenon that the speakers of language used to communicate. Its main physical parameter is the tone, and its acoustic parameter is the fundamental frequency ( $F_0$ ). The tone is the sensation produced by the  $F_0$ , and as children learn to read with good prosody, they exhibit an intonation tone that is more like adults', which has been associated with a good fluency level (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006, 2008; Schwanenflugel et al., 2004).

Pauses contribute to characterize rhythm and intonation patterns. Several studies have informed that the frequency of those pauses could be related to automaticity and comprehension (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010; Dowhower, 1987). It means, the less able readers tend to do more pauses in an inappropriate way than good readers, which may affect their reading comprehension (Dowhower, 1991). To readers with less experience, the number of incorrect pauses could be related to their capacity to decode (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008).

Another prosodical characteristic is phrasing or segmentation. These indicate the grouping of words into units or significant phrases. A phrase is appropriate when the group of words that makes it as such is syntactic and phonologically acceptable (Dowhower, 1991). Different studies (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010; Dowhower, 1987; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006) observed that appropriate phrasing could affect positively reading comprehension.

Volume depends on the pressure that the air makes from the lungs to the throat. When reading, the volume is related to the intention that the text receives, which means, if a reader is competent will be able to adjust the volume to the interpretation that makes of the text and the context where she or he does the reading.

Several authors also consider the rhythm as a reading expression feature (Cortés, 2002; Fountas y Pinnell, 2010; Rasinski & Padak, 2008). According to Cortés

(2002), rhythm has as a function grouping the sounds into blocks or rhythmic groups to avoid monotony, contributing to maintaining the listener attention as facilitates the message comprehension. That way, a too slow or too fast reading may interfere with the text meaning comprehension.

Such elements contribute to expressiveness and they strengthen understanding (Dowhower, 1991), they suggest that the reader has segmented the text according to its main semantic and syntactic elements (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). If a reader can integrate these elements when reading aloud, it is prosodic reading and its reading will resemble a conversation (Dowhower, 1991; Hudson et al., 2005).

Different studies have shown that prosody is related to the acquisition and development of various written language skills such as reading words (Whalley & Hansen, 2006), the reading of words and pseudowords (Calet et al., 2015), achieving fluent reading (Schwanenflugel et al., 2004) and reading comprehension (Calet et al., 2016; Kanik Uysal & Bilge, 2018; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006, 2008; Whalley & Hansen, 2006).

#### *Fluency, Dyslexia and Prosody in the Spanish language*

One of the characteristic deficits of dyslexic students is the inability to read fluently (Lyon et al., 2003), for whom the processes of learning to read and become skilled readers are arduous tasks. Studies show that no matter the language, dyslexics are more inaccurate and slower in reading single words, as in pseudowords and texts (Pae et al., 2017; Schaars et al., 2017; Suárez-Coalla & Cuetos, 2017; Ziegler et al., 2003). This seems to be related to the difficulty of acquiring and automating the alphabetic code and difficulty in developing orthographic representations of words (Suárez-Coalla & Cuetos, 2017), consequently, they fail to develop reading fluency.

Unlike the accuracy and speed of reading in dyslexics, suprasegmental phonology or prosody is the element of fluency that has received the least attention. This gap widens when comparing studies conducted in English (Calet et al., 2016) with studies conducted in transparent languages such as Spanish. Two studies carried out with Spanish dyslexic people inform that they have differences compared to typical readers regarding prosody performance (Suárez-Coalla et al., 2016; Jimenez-Fernandez et al., 2015). Suarez-Coalla et al. (2016) conducted two experiments, the former with children and the latter with adults. In the first experiment, the researchers found that there were differences in both the number and duration of breaks and in the intonation of the different types of sentences. In the case of the adults, they also observed differences with the control group, although to a lesser

extent. The data suggest that the development of prosody relies on other reading skills, such as decoding, speed and reading accuracy. Furthermore, Jiménez-Fernández et al. (2015) observed that Spanish dyslexics children also have a problem with stress awareness skill. The results of the study revealed that the group with dyslexia showed a significantly higher number of errors in the detection of the stressed syllable and, in addition, a longer response time. Likewise, the participants of the control group used different strategies of lexical knowledge, while the group with dyslexia tended to apply a single strategy to process words and pseudowords.

### *Readers Theatre to Improve Prosody*

In researching about the teaching of reading fluency it is suggested that repeated oral reading is the most used and effective strategy for improving fluency (Lee & Yoon, 2017; Stevens et al., 2016; Wexler et al., 2008). Assisted repeated reading strategies seem to be more effective than repeated reading strategies without assistance since when the reading is previously modelled, a greater increase in fluency is obtained (Lee & Yoon, 2017; Rasinski, 2014).

Within the set of strategies that have been conceived to develop and improve reading, fluency is the reader's theatre. The readers' theatre is a strategy of assisted repeated reading that consists of performing a play with characters and narrator, as in the traditional theatre, but reading the text out loud. Unlike traditional theatre, the readers' theatre does not require memorization of texts, costumes, accessories and special stages, becoming an affordable and simple activity to implement. It also has the purpose of genuine communication that encourages the readers to re-read the text to share their interpretation with others (Rasinski, 2010; Young & Nageldinger, 2014). This characteristic to the readers' theatre allows students to maintain interest in the activity in time, without causing exhaustion or boredom, on the contrary to what happens when the reading of a text without an authentic intention is repeated.

Several studies have observed that the use of the readers' theatre in systematic programs carried out with primary school students brings benefits for prosody in reading (Garzón et al., 2008; Keehn, 2003; Mraz et al., 2013; Young & Rasinski, 2009, 2017). Young & Rasinski (2017) notes that this technique is one of the best to develop and improve the fluency of students. The improvement of this ability would not only be appreciated in the rehearsed scripts, but it would also transfer to previously unread texts (Keehn, 2003; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Tyler & Chard, 2000).

The reader's theatre allows for the improvement of the reading interpretation so that the story becomes

more real. The fact that the students must tell a story through their voices allows them to use the language exploring different ways to transmit it, as well as to intensify the correct pronunciation of the words and the tonal aspects of language. This is the main reason why the theatrical text works when developing expression (Rasinski, 2014) because it is a text that contains dialogues. For example, it allows the students to try out different tonalities that can be given to the voice to convey the character's emotions that appear in the story such as fear, joy or sadness are understood by their peers and by the audience (Young & Nageldinger, 2014).

Although the lack of reading fluency is recurrent in dyslexics students, there is a lack of studies focused on improving prosody in reading, especially in Spanish-speaking dyslexic students. Even more important is to consider the fact that the Chilean education system is highly segregating (Carrasco et al. 2014), in which many girls and boys are left behind because of the lack of learning opportunities. To diminish the gap, the purpose of this exploratory work has been to verify if this program is a good intervention proposal. The specific research questions were:

Is the reader theatre intervention program effective to improve the prosody of dyslexic school children?

Is the reader theatre intervention program effective for children with different socioeconomic status (SES) environments?

Are reading prosody improvements of theatre texts generalized to descriptive texts?

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

To investigate the effects of a reader's theatre program on prosody, the program evaluation method was used (Rossi et al., 2004), following the Context, Input, Process, Product Evaluation Model (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007) and a pre-experimental pre-test post-test design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). According to Rossi et al. (2004), it is a valid design to verify if an intervention program is suitable to reach an impact, and then continue using another kind of stronger design. That is why this design has a clear exploratory character.

### *Participants and Setting*

The sample consisted of 11 dyslexic students (seven boys and four girls) that were studying in the third and fourth grade of Primary Education, aged between eight and ten years ( $M = 8.90$ ;  $SD = .83$ ). They were

students from two schools located in the urban area of a city in Chile, with a diverse SES. These children were previously identified as dyslexic in compliance with the principles for the diagnosis of dyslexia established in DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2014), and they were not having any kind of support for their reading problems in or out of school, so they were derived to the author of this study to receive specific assistance according to their difficulties. All the participants had manifested problems with written language since the beginning of the formal learning of it. Also, it should be noted that the average reading delay was one year and five months, that the intelligent quotient was between 95 and 117 and that they had no apparent reason to explain their difficulties with reading and writing.

They were distributed in two groups according to the school of origin: Public School Group ( $n = 5$ ), belonging to a public school and a medium-low and low socioeconomic level, problems of school performance and desertion of the education system, and Private School Group ( $n = 6$ ), belonging to a Catholic centre with a medium and medium-high socioeconomic level. Considering how complicated it was to coordinate their schedules, and with the consent of their parents, they were distributed separately.

#### *Chilean school system context*

There is evidence about the influence that SES has over the students' cognitive development and academic performance (Herbers et al., 2012). Children from socioeconomic disadvantage families have more possibilities to develop reading difficulties (Noble et al., 2006; Urquijo et al., 2015). There is evidence that the SES has a triggering role in the differences in the development of several reading precursors (Duncan & Seymour, 2000; Espinoza & Rosas, 2019). Those differences are especially relevant in Chile, where there is a high segregation level in the educational system (Carrasco et al. 2014), and it has been observed significant differences in the reading performance measured through a standardized test called Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación that is annually taken. According to the Agencia de la Calidad (2015), the socioeconomic group that the students belong to is an explanatory factor for the results of students from second, fourth and sixth grade in elementary school regarding reading comprehension.

Furthermore, there is evidence that, in general, the Chilean teachers do not feel prepared to assist children with special educational needs and mention they do not have the pedagogical tools or the knowledge to support diversity (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). Considering those facts, it is necessary to carry out a study of how the

specific programs focused on students with different SES impact them since those children with low SES could be less sensitive to those stimuli (Espinoza & Rosas, 2019).

#### *Probes and Proceeding*

An assessment of the prosody was carried out to establish the baseline and check the effectiveness of the intervention. The Adapted Prosody Appreciation Scale was designed, based on the work of Rasinski and Padak (2008) and Fountas and Pinell (2010). These types of instruments have been identified as valid and reliable for teachers to evaluate the prosodic reading of students (Kuhn et al., 2010; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006). The purpose of this scale was to assess the prosodic features of rhythm, volume, intonation, pauses and phrasing. In addition, it included a global score, called integration, which assessed the quality of reading at a general level. Each of these aspects was valued in a range of 1 to 4 points, with 1 being the lowest execution and 4 being the highest execution. With the sum of these scores, the global score of the prosody was obtained. In this way, overall scores obtained by children could fluctuate between 6 and 24 points.

To obtain the scores in prosody preintervention we used the reading of Theatrical Text (TT), in which each student had to read the full text following the instruction "read out loud the best you can." Generalization probes were collected consequently narrative texts Form A from the Pruebas de Dominio Lector (PDL) (Marchant, Recart, Cuadrado & Sanhueza, 2009), as appropriate to the school level of children and following the indications described in the manual of this instrument. For both texts, the time of reading out loud was one minute, according to the suggestions provided by some authors (Allington, 2009; Rasinski & Padak, 2008). These were evaluated individually in a classroom of their respective educational centres, within school hours and with the prior permission of their parents and teachers. Each evaluation lasted approximately 5 minutes and was recorded in audio. Once the program was completed, the corresponding post-test probes were collected. Children had to read a new TT with similar characteristics and, in the case of PDL, they read form B following the same pre-test instructions. Both, the pre-test and the post-test were carried out controlling the same conditions, norms, moments and times of application in the two groups of participants in the study.

#### *Intervention*

The program was carried out in groups, outside school hours and in a classroom of the education centre of both groups.

To the program design, it was considered an interactive reading difficulties perspective (Harmey, 2020) and few didactic principles have been taken into consideration according to the students' needs. The first one is students with severe difficulties in reading require an intensive and continuous intervention (Allington, 2009; Rasinski, 2014; Wexler et al., 2008) that allows determining the impact of the repeated reading on students' achievement. It had a total duration of 60 sessions of an hour for each group, distributed weekly throughout the first four months of the school year. Each play was worked on during five sessions. Another principle was to choose the texts carefully. In general, researchers agree to mention the importance of practising the reading of accessible texts (Allington et al., 2015; Rasinski, 2010). It means, that fits the students' reading level, nor too dense neither have an unfamiliar vocabulary, since fluency seems to develop faster (Mesmer, 2010; Rasinski & Padak, 2008). A total of twelve children's theatre plays was selected, adapted to make their readability easier according to Rasinski's instructions (2010). Some of them were to choose scripts between 2 and 5 pages, transcribed in letter-size sheets, Arial font, 12 font size and 1.5 spacing which representation were not longer than 15 minutes. The annotations were in bold to make the difference from the main text and the intonation pattern composed by phrases and affirmative, negative, exclamatory interrogative, passive and active sentences where complex words were changed emphasizing high-frequency words. Among the text topics, there were texts regarding cooperation, nature respect, the value of friendship, among others. Table 1 shows the design of the intervention.

### Reliability

Since Prosody has a subjective character, blind judgements were made of the student's readings by two external judges without knowing if they had done it before or after the intervention. The inter-rater agreement was calculated by the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient. The values obtained in the pre-test were 0.56 ( $p = .001$ ) for the reading of TT and 0.62 ( $p = .001$ ) for the reading of PDL texts. Correspondingly, the post-test analysis of concordance between the judges was 0.65 ( $p = .001$ ) and 0.78 ( $p = .001$ ) for the reading of TT and the reading of texts of the PDL, respectively. In both cases, those values were considered acceptable to the judges' reliability.

### Results

Initially, the Mann Whitney U test was used to check if there had been significant differences between the Public and Private groups before the intervention. The obtained results showed that both groups were equivalent before starting the program's

implementation in the prosody variable (See Table 2). Secondly, a comparative analysis of initial and final performance in the variable prosody and its prosodic characteristics for each of the groups was performed, using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. Table 3 summarizes the descriptive statistics and the results obtained in that analysis. In this table, it can be observed that the gains of the program are greater in the reading of TT than in the reading of PDL texts for both groups.

The performed analysis showed that both groups obtained a significant improvement in the post-test, both in the reading of TT (Public School Group,  $Z = -2.04$ ,  $p = .041$ ; Private School Group,  $Z = -2.23$ ,  $p = .026$ ) as in the reading of texts of the PDL (Public School Group,  $Z = -2.06$ ,  $p = .039$ ; Private School Group,  $Z = -2.21$ ,  $p = .027$ ), observing a large effect size (Public School Group, TT,  $d = 5.2$  and PDL,  $d = 1.4$ ; Private School Group, TT,  $d = 4.5$  and PDL,  $d = 4.01$ ).

The public group obtained an increase in the global prosody of 8.4 points in TT, being the prosody features with the biggest gains on rhythm ( $Z = -2.041$ ,  $p = .041$ ), phrasing ( $Z = -2.070$ ,  $p = .038$ ), intonation ( $Z = -2.236$ ,  $p = .025$ ) and pauses ( $Z = -2.121$ ,  $p = .034$ ). Regarding the volume, even though there were few improvements between the pre-test and the post-test, this was not significant enough ( $Z = -1.890$ ,  $p = .059$ ). On this same group, but on the PDL text, the prosody increased 4.4 points compared to the first measure, but intonation ( $Z = -2.121$ ,  $p = .034$ ) and the pauses ( $Z = -2.000$ ,  $p = .046$ ) had significant improvements, while the rhythm ( $Z = -1.000$ ,  $p = .31$ ), the volume ( $Z = -1.633$ ,  $p = .102$ ) and the phrasing did not ( $Z = -1.732$ ,  $p = .083$ ).

Meanwhile, the Private School Group had an increase of 8.5 points in TT and 6.7 in the PDL text regarding the global measure of prosody. Although the students improved in all the prosodic characteristics in the reading of both texts, the highest progress was achieved with the TT, to be exact, the phrasing ( $Z = -2.232$ ,  $p = .026$ ), the volume ( $Z = -2.271$ ,  $p = .023$ ) and intonation ( $Z = -2.251$ ,  $p = .024$ ).

To check whether the reader's theatre program was equally effective for the two groups with different SES, the Mann Whitney U statistical test was used. The statistical analysis showed that there were no significant differences between the groups both in the TT reading and in the PDL reading. That is, the effects of the program seem to have been similar for both groups (see table 4).

The analysis carried out shows that in the reading of TT the Public School Group obtained a slightly higher score than the Private School Group in the global level of prosody. The prosodic feature that most

**Table 1**
*Design of intervention*

The general structure of the session of the intervention	Teacher's role	Student's role
Session 1		
Presentation of the play	Presents the play title and encourages the students to make predictions from it.	Comments by responding to the questions asked by the teacher.
Modeled reading	Reads aloud with appropriate expression and speed to transmit a fluent reading to students	Listens to the teacher's reading, while continuing to read the text in silence.
Comment of the text	Discusses the text with students.	Talks with the teacher and the classmates about the content of the story and answer the questions related to the narrative structure of the text and with common aspects to the theatre plays.
Joint reading	Asks students to read aloud and by taking turns.	Reads aloud as best he or she can, according to the teacher's instructions.
At home: reflective reading	Asks students to practice reading the text in the company of an adult, who will ask questions about the content text.	Reads the text aloud and answer the questions posed by the adult.
Session 2		
Guided joint reading	Asks students to read aloud and by taking turns. Corrects reading accuracy, expressiveness and posture while reading. Explain how to transmit moods and emotions through the voice.	Reads the text aloud and corrects the reading of his or her classmates.
Analysis of the characters	Asks questions to students to analyze the story characters	Identifies the character traits, emotions and feelings represented in the text
Assignment of the characters	Assigns characters to students according to their interests, personality and reading level, and asks them to highlight the assigned parts with fluorescent color.	Highlights the dialogue corresponding to the assigned character.
At home: repeated reading of content words	Asks students to read a list of content words of the text accompanied by an adult, who records the mistakes and speed.	Reads the list of words aloud
Session 3		
Guided joint reading	Asks students to read the assigned character aloud and by taking turns. Correct the reading	Reads aloud the text of their characters and correct his or her classmate's reading.
Guided reading in pairs or trios	Asks students to read aloud the assigned character to their classmates.  Guides students with their characters	Reads aloud the text of the character and correct the classmate's reading.
Guided joint reading	Asks students to read aloud and by taking turns the assigned character. Correct the readings.	Reads aloud the text of the character and correct his or her classmate's reading.
At home: repeated reading of the assigned character's text	Asks students to practice the assigned character reading accompany by an adult, who records the mistakes and speed.	Reads aloud the text of the character.
Session 4		
Guided joint reading	Repeats what was done in session 3.	Repeats what was done in session 3.
Guided reading in pairs or trios		
Guided joint reading		
At home: repeated reading of the assigned character's text	Asks students to read a list of a functional word in the text in the company of an adult, who records the mistakes and the speed.	Reads a list of words aloud.
Session 5		
Guided joint reading	Asks students to read the assigned character aloud and by taking turns. Corrects the reading.	Reads the text of the character aloud and corrects his or her classmate's reading.
Performance of the play	Organizes the final representation and records it in the video.	Performs the play reading along with his or her classmates.
Evaluation of the performance	Asks students to watch the video of the play and appreciate their performance.	Analyzes the video of the play along with his or her classmates and teacher.

**Table 2**

*Differences between the Public School Group and Private School Group in reading Theatrical Text and "Pruebas de Dominio Lector" Text pre-test*

Variable	TT			PDL		
	Public School Group	Private School Group	p	Public School Group	Private School Group	p
Prosody	11.0 (1.87)	10.33 (2.06)	.66	11.6 (2.88)	12.0 (1.09)	.42
Rhythm	1.60 (.55)	.83 (.41)	.54	2.00 (.71)	2.00 (.00)	1.00
Volume	2.60 (.55)	2.00 (.63)	.18	2.80 (.45)	2.67 (.52)	.79
Intonation	.80 (.45)	1.67 (.52)	.79	1.80 (.45)	2.00 (.63)	.66
Pauses	1.80 (0.45)	1.83 (.41)	.93	1.80 (.84)	2.17 (.41)	.43
Phrasing	1.40 (.55)	1.33 (.52)	.93	1.20 (.45)	1.17 (.41)	.93
Integration	1.80 (.45)	1.67 (.52)	.79	2.00 (.71)	2.00 (.00)	1.00

Note. TT= Theatrical Text; PDL= Pruebas de Dominio Lector Text.

**Table 3**

*Descriptive statics and, pre-test and post-test results*

Variable	Public School Group					Private School Group				
	TT		p	PDL		TT		p	PDL	
	Pre-test	Post-test		Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test		Pre-test	Post-test
Prosody	11.0 (1.87)	19.4 (1.34)	.04*	11.6 (2.88)	16.0 (3.24)	10.33 (2.06)	18.83 (1.72)	.03*	18.67 (1.03)	.03*
Rhythm	1.60 (.54)	3.20 (.44)	.04*	2.00 (.70)	2.20 (.44)	1.83 (.40)	2.50 (.54)	.04*	2.83 (.40)	.02*
Volume	2.60 (.54)	3.60 (.54)	.06	2.80 (.44)	3.60 (.54)	2.00 (.63)	3.67 (.81)	.02*	3.83 (.40)	.02*
Intonation	1.80 (.44)	2.80 (.44)	.03*	1.80 (.44)	3.00 (.70)	1.67 (.51)	3.17 (.40)	.02*	3.00 (.00)	.03*
Pauses	1.80 (.44)	3.00 (.00)	.03*	1.80 (.83)	2.60 (1.14)	1.83 (.40)	3.00 (.00)	.02*	3.00 (.00)	.02*
Phrasing	1.40 (.54)	3.80 (.44)	.04*	1.20 (.44)	1.80 (.83)	1.33 (.51)	3.50 (.83)	.03*	3.00 (.63)	.02*
Integration	1.80 (.44)	3.00 (.00)	.03*	2.00 (.70)	2.80 (.44)	1.67 (.51)	3.00 (.00)	.02*	3.00 (.00)	.01*

Note. TT= Theatrical Text; PDL= Pruebas de Dominio Lector Text.

\*p < .05

**Table 4**

*Differences between the Public School Group and Private School Group in reading Theatrical Text and "Pruebas de Dominio Lector" Text post-test*

Variable	TT			p	PDL		
	Public School Group	Private	School Group		Public School Group	Private School Group	p
Prosody	19.4 (1.34)		18.83 (1.72)	.53	16 (3.24)	18.67 (1.03)	.13
Rhythm	3.20 (.45)		2.50 (.55)	.13	2.20 (.45)	2.83 (.41)	.08
Volume	3.60 (.55)		3.67 (.82)	.66	3.60 (.55)	3.83 (.41)	.54
Intonation	2.80 (.45)		3.17 (.41)	.43	3.00 (.71)	3.00 (.00)	1.00
Pauses	3.00 (.00)		3.00 (.00)	1.00	2.60 (1.14)	3.00 (.00)	.66
Phrasing	3.80 (.45)		3.50 (.84)	.66	1.80 (.84)	3.00 (.63)	.05*
Integration	3.00 (.00)		3.00 (.00)	1.00	2.80 (.45)	3.00 (.00)	.66

Note. TT= Theatrical Text; PDL= Pruebas de Dominio Lector Text.

\*p < .05

differentiates them is the rhythm ( $Z = -1.927, p = .126$ ). Meanwhile, in the reading of descriptive texts, students of Private School Group are the ones who outscored their peers in both the global level of prosody ( $Z = -1.662, p = .126$ ) as in all the measured prosodic features, except for intonation.

## Discussion

This exploratory study aimed to determine the effectiveness of a reader's theatre program about prosody in the reading process of students with a specific reading learning difficulty. The results obtained in this study indicate that the program seems to produce significant improvements in this variable in both groups. These results match with the findings of previous studies (Garzón et al., 2008; Keehn, 2003; Mraz, et al., 2013; Young & Rasinski, 2009, 2017), that suggest that the use of the reader's theatre helps increase the level of prosody in oral reading of texts.

A consubstantial strategy to the readers' theatre is repeated reading (Tyler & Chard, 2000). Many studies have used repeated reading to increase the level of fluency (Lee & Yoon, 2017). Reading repeatedly allows readers to manage their attentional resources to other cognitive processes such as text comprehension or prosody and not so much to the decoding of the text. In this work, repeated reading became a prominent element of the program, as the students read their scripts several times aloud, to perfect their prosody.

The readers' theatre allowed students to work in prosodic, or suprasegmental features of reading fluency such as modulating voice tones to express emotions and feelings raised by the author, marking pauses at strategic places and emphasizing the words properly. At the end of the program, it was observed that both groups improved their general level of prosody and measured prosodic characteristics. So, we consider that students who are dyslexic can also benefit from repeated readings as shown in some studies (Lee & Yoon, 2017; Stevens, et al., 2016).

The second question of our study was to test whether the reader's theatre program was equally effective for two socioeconomic distinct groups. In the TT reading, the Public School Group was slightly higher than the Private School Group. As observed in the analysis performed, the differences found among the participants were not meaningful, except for intonation on PDL text. Therefore, the program seems to have been equally effective for both groups. Findings reinforce the idea that children with difficulties have scarce opportunities to move forward in their learning, but the opportunities to improve their performance and academic success increase when they are supported and have the specialized attention that matches their needs from an interactive perspective

(Harmey, 2020). The replication of the same results in students with different socioeconomic status reinforces the internal validity of the program. Nevertheless, we are aware that, since we do not have control groups, variables such as history, maturation, instrumentation, etc., may have influenced the observed changes.

Regarding our third question, if reading prosody improvements of theater texts would be generalized to descriptive texts, it was found that both groups obtained better performance in the post-test compared to the pre-test. Though, the readers' theater could have a facilitating effect on learning, since it would benefit generalization, as suggested in other studies (Keehn, 2003; Tyler & Chard, 2000). However, the Private Group had better performance and obtained significant benefits in their prosody, while the Public Group did not obtain statistically significant differences in rhythm, volume and phrasing.

It is also observed that the benefits were less in the reading of descriptive texts. This fact could be due to several reasons. First, the lack of reading accuracy is a persistent difficulty in dyslexic subjects, becoming an elusive goal. Second, repeated reading of words or texts helps to visually recognize words and reinforce correspondences; but for children who have a specific difficulty with some letter, this kind of task is generally not enough. This fact makes us reflect on the need to dedicate complimentary hours in the intervention to work on the reading accuracy of those students with pronounced difficulty. But, even though they obtained fewer benefits in the descriptive reading texts, our results may indicate that students learnt to use and relate knowledge with a new reading experience. By changing a few aspects of the program, greater benefits may be reached in both groups of students, even more in those who present some contextual disadvantages (Espinoza & Rosas, 2019; Noble et al., 2006; Urquijo et al., 2015).

Although the program helped to improve the prosody in the reading of texts of the study participants, this work has some limitations. The main limitation was not having a control group that showed that the results obtained were due to the program itself and not to other variables. The investigations carried out on the readers' theatre as a strategy for the development of prosody are scarce, and even more, those that use an experimental design as part of their methodology. Making a study of this kind would give us a clearer vision of the effects of the program on the prosody of the participants. Another limitation is not having made a more exhaustive selection of the participants, as they were selected according to the type of errors of reading accuracy that they made since other variables involved in fluency such as accuracy and automation could have had implications for greater improvements in the prosody.



Much of the research that has been done, concerning programs to develop fluency, have not always put their attention on prosody (Rasinski, 2014; Young & Rasinski, 2017), but to reach the reader accuracy and automation. Furthermore, it is not easy for a teacher to find reading strategies that draw the attention of school children and by which they feel motivated. The program presented has also an impact on teachers or education professionals, since it is a useful tool that encourages reading, focuses on expressiveness, gives schoolchildren a real reading environment in which they can share and live reading, and allows for teamwork. It is for this reason that reader's theatre can be an effective strategy to develop prosody in the reading of school children with a specific difficulty in learning to read since it has not only allowed improving this ability, but it has also turned out to be highly motivating for children who, in most cases, manifest a rejection towards the tasks of reading.

The present study has provided preliminary evidence that a specialized intervention can benefit school children who have reading difficulties and come from different environments, but more rigorous research is needed.

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