"THEATRE" IN THE CLASSROOM:
USING READERS THEATRE TO IMPROVE
EFL LEARNERS’ ORAL SKILLS

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Abstract

Dialogues, scenes and drama that approximate real communication, provide a
dynamic form in which language skills can be introduced and reinforced. Readers
Theater (RT) is an example of story dramatization in which readers write drama
scripts to portray characters from the text they have read. To portray a character,
readers strive for voice flexibility, good articulation, proper pronunciation and
projection. Our study investigates whether RT motivates EFL learners to appreciate
expository text and if RT enhances their oral skills. Learners were first required to
read an expository comprehension passage then write a script based on the topic.
The findings from our studies show that RT generated greater appreciation for
expository text among EFL learners, encouraged them to engage in creative writing
and boosted their confidence in handling spoken dialogue. Our belief is that RT is a
highly rewarding language learning experience for EFL learners.

Introduction

Readers Theater (RT) was first introduced as a minimal theatre in support of litera-
ture and reading. It was originally developed as a means to present literary works in
dramatic form. RT allows students to engage in creative writing through adding and
recreating lines in a story script, and by providing introductory and transitional details
as they adapt a piece of literature into dramatic form. Readers first read through a
piece of literary work and then write a script to produce an original dramatic
production. Although using RT in various educational settings is not a new idea, it is
more recently used as a teaching technique in language classrooms where students
engage in negotiating the meanings of a text, exchange their interpretations of the
text and generate their responses to the text through multi-phrased dramatic
classroom activities (Liu, 2000). According to Hill (1990), in creating RT scripts,
students increase their knowledge of language structure (vocabulary, syntax and
meaning), language use (forms and functions of language use) and their metalinguistic
awareness (the ability to talk about language).
Dougill (1987) outlines two important reasons why scripts are of particular value to language learning. Firstly, scripts provide a rich source of comprehensible input in language that is natural and spoken. This is in contrast to the atomistic approach of much of the language skill found in many course books where language is broken down into sentences or even smaller units. What spoken language is contained therein often takes the form of realistic (and uninvolving) slices of dialogue that have little value in terms of style or humor. Secondly, scripts also offer psychological security to the student.

This is particularly applicable to EFL learners who generally exhibit language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986) particularly in English oral proficiency and are looking for a secure starting point. Berlinger (2000) recognizing the benefits of scripted dialogues in encouraging English expressions argues that scripts have long been employed in ESL instruction because they permit students to actively acquire the vocabulary, idioms, grammar and syntax of English speech. He also points out that such dialogue involves all aspects of language. In addition, scripts that are rehearsed in class can offer students a dynamic encounter that comes closest to real communication.

Since the writing of scripts involved all aspects of language, RT would enable EFL learners to acquire language in a real communicative context and allows creativity. Using RT in teaching English would help EFL learners to improve their communication skills and their capacity to imagine is extended. Hearing well-written stories reinforces their use of language skills, encourages them to read with avidity, and stimulates concentrated listening (Sloyer, 1982).

However, Wolf (1994) argues that although most discussions of RT focus on its possibilities of enhancing comprehension and appreciation of literature as well as its emphasis on oral interpretations, few claims are substantiated by research. This study aims to examine the extent RT motivates EFL learners to appreciate expository text and if RT enhances EFL learners' oral skills.

The Study

RT was introduced to two groups of students: Chinese EFL learners in Singapore and Chinese EFL learners in the People’s Republic of China. The first group were students from the P R China who were pursuing an intensive English course in a tertiary institution in Singapore. The course ran for a period of six months. The second group consisted of student nurses pursuing a three-week intensive English course in a health school in Sichuan, PR China. The study was designed around two research questions:
Do EFL learners have positive experiences using RT to improve their oral skills?

Do EFL learners show greater appreciation for expository text through RT?

**Participants**

RT was first carried out as a pilot study among a group of students from the PR China who were pursuing an intensive English course in a tertiary institution in Singapore. The course ran for a period of six months and it was aimed at raising students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The class consisted of fifteen male and female students, around the ages of 18-20. Their English proficiency was equivalent to that of first year secondary EL1 (English as a first language) students in Singapore.

The exercise was then repeated with 57 Chinese student nurses in PR China. These students were enrolled in an intensive English course conducted by Singaporeans teachers in Sichuan, China. There were three classes with students around the ages of 18-20. The materials used were essentially medical based. The course ran for a period of three weeks. The aims of the course were to improve the oral/aural skills and familiarize students to medical English. The program was conducted from Monday to Friday with three-hour sessions in the morning and afternoon.

**Reasons for using RT in an EFL classroom.**

From the beginning of the course, the learners showed difficulties in reading and understanding selected expository texts. As a result, many learners could not appreciate the topics in the reading passages. Students also felt that the text did not allow them much opportunity to practise their spoken English in class. The attention to details and analysis of word usage gradually led students to become unmotivated, passive and dictionary dependent learners. RT was introduced to motivate EFL learners to appreciate expository texts and to help them to gain confidence to talk about the topic they had read.

**Methodology**

An expository text on "Euthanasia" was used for this study. Vocabulary was pre-taught. Students first read the passage individually and discussed their responses to the topic. There were effectively three phases we used in implementing this study.

**Phase One: Writing the Script**

After students had gained sufficient background knowledge of the topic, they were put in groups of three and four. They were then given the task of writing a script on the topic, guided by this scenario:
"Mr. Tan See Beng, 51, has brain tumour, a terminal disease and is now lying on bed in great agony in the Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Dr. Lim, is now advising his family members to prepare for the worst, stating that Mr Tan See Beng has at most three months to live. Mr Tan Seng Kim, the patient’s brother, is now discussing the possibility of imposing euthanasia with Dr. Lim and other family members".

Students then wrote scripts based on the above, involving the following characters: the patient, a relative and/or a nurse and Dr. Lim himself. Students were told that they could either follow the scenario in writing the script or they may choose to write their own story.

**Phase Two: Rehearsing the script**

After students had finished writing the scripts, they read and rehearsed their roles. While reading their own individual lines, students were told the importance of reading meaningfully, with vocal variety, clarity and force to bring out the character. Students were keen to rehearse their lines as they had a chance to act out the lines they had written as well as having the opportunity to practise their oral skills.

**Phase Three: Performing the script**

As required by the RT activity, students were encouraged to "perform" a short drama. Many had their scripts at hand and they were encouraged to "act out" imaginative endings of the story. Without much prompting or guidance from teachers the students quickly got into character. The students were significantly engaged and quite theatrical in their reading. They read their dialogues loudly after some cues from classmates who were unable to hear them. Encouraged by their classmates’ enthusiasm and success in the activity, some students read their scripts with much emotion and were dramatic in their approach.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected from three sources: (1) learners’ reflective journals; (2) a questionnaire survey of learners’ reactions towards the use of RT in class; (3) teachers’ observations of using RT in the class.

**Learners’ reflective journals**

Students were told to write a page a day in their journals which would not be graded. They were told that they should write what impressed them during the course and what they learned from it.

**The questionnaire survey**

We conducted a questionnaire survey after the RT activity. Students completed a questionnaire, which consisted of twelve Likert-scale questions. The questions were designed to explicitly elicit students’ opinions about RT.
**Teachers’ observations**

We also designed five open-ended questions for the teachers to provide us with their observations in using RT in the classroom.

**Results**

57 students completed the questionnaires. We rated the responses as to frequency and tabulated them into percentages which were rounded off so that they do not always reflect 100% (see Appendix A). The main focus of the questionnaire was to ascertain students’ reactions to RT. In their responses to the first question 54.3% strongly agreed that the lesson was more interesting with RT. A majority of 77% strongly agreed that RT was a good way of learning spoken English. 61.4% agreed they were more confident using English through RT to ascertain if the students liked working collaboratively, 56.1% said they enjoyed working with friends in writing and performing RT. Only 22.8% indicated that they preferred to learn English on their own rather than in a group. It is interesting to note that most students were motivated to improve their English after watching their friends perform (35% agreed and 42.1% strongly agreed). This could mean extrinsic motivation plays a major role in their learning.

In an attempt to answer the first research question (whether learners had positive experiences using RT to improve their oral skills) data from student journals were examined. Student journal entries during the course were examined and compared with entries made on the day RT was introduced. This was done to see if RT made any significant impression in their learning experience. The information gathered from these entries was cross-validated by comparing them with comments made in the student questionnaire. Although journals from this age group seldom had the very personal, dairylke qualities (Hurlow, 1993), we found that the writings from the journals were reflective and honest. In an attempt to answer the second research question (whether learners showed greater appreciation for expository text through RT) we analyzed teachers comments about their observations before and after the activity was introduced.

**First Research Question**

To answer our first research question “Do EFL learners have positive experiences using RT to improve their oral skills?”, we focused on students’ reflective writing made in their daily journal entries. We mainly wanted to find out if RT has made any impression or impact in their EFL learning experience.

The extracts below from students’ journal entries showed that there were significant impressions of RT experience for some students. In order to retain the authenticity of the comments, no edition has been made on the students’ comments.
• Students mainly recorded how they prepared for the activity and how they felt about the topic 'Euthanasia'.

"...We perform the story about Euthanasia. There are four persons in our group: doctor, patient, wife and daughter. It's very interesting. We debated, smiled, cried from disagreeing to agreeing. I think we action it well”

"...This story is very moving... Every group did it well”

"...We had a discussion about Euthanasia. Everyone gave their opinions”

• Other students wrote of how they felt watching their friends performed and their own personal experience performing for the class. Some noted of the change in classroom atmosphere.

"In my class, at first almost everyone is very shy, not bold. So the atmosphere of the class is not very active. The teachers' humor and way of teaching change our shy to bold. My classmates became bold and act the performance very well. The atmosphere is not dull”.

"...This afternoon I and my classmates gave a performance. The other students also gave a performance. We are very happy?though this drama is very short, I feel it was very interesting because we practiced speaking and writing”.

"...Every group was very interesting with their own characters?Following this I will study much more, for example write script, learn new words, and listen to pronunciation”.

Second Research Question

In order to answer our second research question, "Do EFL learners show greater appreciation for expository text through RT?" we examined and analyzed teachers comments and observations. There were six teachers teaching the course. All except one, commented that students in their class responded favorably to RT at the beginning and at the end of the lesson.

• When asked whether class benefited from RT, teachers' response was:

"Yes, it was a good opportunity for them to learn to write and take on a role to dramatize. Also an opportunity for them to listen to each other's ideas. RT livened the class”.

"I found my students expressing the kinds of struggles present in such a situation and presented them in a very light-hearted
way. They had fun and I believe learning takes place in this situation.”

Yes, I do think so. Especially in helping students to word their thoughts.

- When asked whether RT is an effective way to teach oral English, teachers commented:

“...It was good practice for tone and volume/pitch. Stress cannot be effectively taught because some students struggled with pronunciation and the use of vocabulary.”

“...There were equal opportunities for students to express themselves. They are also able to correct their pronunciation at the end of their presentation?”

“Yes, RT is a good activity for students to practice vocabulary, structures and pronunciation.”

- When asked to comment on the useful aspects or difficulties or using RT in the classroom, the response from teachers were:

“Students will have to be on task and enthusiastic. They also must feel comfortable with working with other group members. It gives the students more confidence before presentation and allows them to rehearse, check for mistakes”.

“The topic chosen was too difficult for a class with limited understanding of the ethics behind Euthanasia”

“There were time constraints but students clearly had fun”.

From the data, we found that with RT students began to show a greater interest in appreciating expository text. The teachers’ observations revealed that students first found expository texts uninteresting and could not relate them to their lives. As a result, they were rather passive during class discussions. When RT was introduced, there were general observations of active participation the lessons. The teachers also observed that students began to enjoy discussing the topic on ुEuthanasiaु in depth. A lot of discussions were generated during the lessons as students debated among themselves whether Euthanasia is morally justifiable. Students looked at the issue from different perspectives such as the medical, religious and economic arguments against Euthanasia. They then created different characters to show differ-
ences in opinions. Under the cover of their roles, students began to debate about whether it is morally right for a doctor to end a patient’s life. The focus thus shifted from learning about the English language to using English to communicate about a topic that is interesting and relevant to their lives. This is evident during brainstorming of ideas for their scripts, where students learnt to improvise on dialogue using vocabulary and sentence patterns from the text such as “malignant,” “terminally ill,” “agony”.

**Discussion**

In this study we found that most of the EFL learners were afraid of speaking in class due to their feelings of inadequacies and limited opportunities to use the language. RT boosted their confidence in handling spoken English by giving them opportunities in using direct speech to make suggestions, offer opinions, or to disagree. This is because through RT, students learn to transform indirect speech into direct speech. We also found that students exhibited more confidence in reading aloud in class. We agree with Cusworth (1997) who observed that oral reading is one of the hardest things students can be asked to do. In oral reading, readers must process what’s in their heads and look several words ahead of what they’re enunciating. While it’s sometimes necessary to ask students to read aloud for diagnostic reasons, it’s imperative that we find ways to help them develop confidence about doing so.

Through this RT experience, students have a chance to understand expository texts by collaborating with fellow classmates and reflecting on their experiences. RT also enhances the oral skills of EFL learners as they learn to experiment with their voices by varying their pitch and volume to portray the character during rehearsals. RT enables students to concentrate on the elements of voice which carry meaning—for example, accelerating and raising the pitch to suggest excitement. Students also pay more attention to their articulation of words, especially when they rehearse their scripts, and even more so when they know that they have to act out the scripts to an audience. Students also learn to deliver smoother speech, with few pauses. This is because repetitive rehearsals of the script increase comprehension as well as fluency. As students rehearse their scripts, they also learn to use tone to portray the attitude of the character. In addition, RT also builds up the confidence of EFL learners to handle spoken dialogue. McRae (1985) points out that if one group of students presents a scene to the class, the stresses and intonations used can be picked up and evaluated by the “audience.” This exercise goes beyond comprehension, taking students closer to the heart of spoken interaction, finding what possible underlying discourse there may be, not expressed in words.
Recommendations

We found that in order to carry out RT successfully in the classroom, sufficient experience in conducting group activity is necessary. The success of the activity initially depends on the teacher’s clear instructions to the students. Some tips we would recommend to the novice:

i. Ensure that every student is involved by getting students to create sufficient characters relating to the topic. The teacher also needs to include the role of a narrator and stress the importance of a good narrator in setting the atmosphere of the play. A narrator can present the topic or theme for the script.

ii. Ensure that each student has sufficient lines for the teacher to assess him/her on speaking skills. Do not allow students to share the script while rehearsing. Stress that each student should have a copy of the script. Impress on students the importance of having a good plot, genuine characters (stress the use of good dialogue to liven up a character).

iii. Encourage students to use sound effects such as footsteps, moaning etc. While the students are rehearsing their script, the teacher should try to reinforce certain vocabulary, grammar or sentence structure if necessary.

iv. Allow students sufficient time to rehearse and revise their script. The teacher should allow students flexibility on roles in case they do not work out. Allow students to role-play as many characters until they find a character they are most comfortable with. This would allow more creative ideas to germinate.

v. Student should be free to approach the teacher should they encounter any problems in pronunciation, tone, stress etc.

vi. When students have finished rehearsing and are ready to perform, it would be a good idea if the teacher could tape/record students’ performance. This helps to create a sense of seriousness and encourage enthusiasm among students.

vii. After students have finished performing, the teacher could allow students to listen/watch their recorded performance. This would allow the teacher to evaluate and provide meaningful feedback. Students would find it a valuable learning experience just watching/hearing themselves!
Conclusion

From the responses of both students and teachers, there is little doubt that EFL students do have positive experiences in using RT to improve their oral skills. RT also helped EFL learners in our study to appreciate expository text as a means to access information that is personally interesting and useful. At the same time, RT also helped them to experience the satisfaction of writing to share ideas with interested readers. However, there can be limitations to using RT in class, particularly if students are not familiar with theater as a genre, or they may not have the linguistically ability to produce their own scripts. In the case of EFL learners, who have just been immersed in a totally English-speaking environment, getting them to write scripts several times before they are ready to perform. Some degree of initial inhibition and resistance to acting would be encountered. However, despite these limitations, RT has the potential to become a valuable teaching technique in improving oral English, especially with intermediate and advanced EFL learners.

References


**Appendix A**

**Survey on Readers Theatre**

1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neutral) 4 (agree) 5 (strongly agree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement (RT=Readers Theatre)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The English lesson was more interesting with RT</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. RT is a good way of learning spoken English</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I feel more confident using English through RT</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. RT is a difficult way of learning English</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Writing the script for RT was not difficult</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I enjoyed working with my friends in writing and performing RT</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>56.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am not confident using English through RT</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. After watching my friends reform, I want to improve my English</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. RT made no difference in the way I learn English</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. RT has helped me improve my writing skills</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 I prefer to learn English on my own than in a group</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I found writing the script difficult</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Introduction

In short, this article will suggest that because so many factors influence how writing is used and perceived, teachers need to be aware of these factors when they are teaching writing. They need to understand that writing is a complex process that involves many different skills and abilities. They also need to be aware of the different ways that students learn to write and how their experiences with writing in school and in other contexts may affect their ability to write. In addition, teachers need to be aware of the feedback that they give their students and how that feedback may affect motivation and self-esteem. Finally, teachers need to be aware of the social and cultural context in which writing takes place and how this context may affect the way that students write.

Some of the factors that influence writing include:

1. The type of feedback that teachers give their students.
2. The way that teachers approach the teaching of writing.
3. The social and cultural context in which writing takes place.

These factors can have a significant impact on the way that students learn to write. For example, if teachers are not clear about what they expect students to write, students may become confused and frustrated. If teachers are not sensitive to the social and cultural context in which writing takes place, students may feel that their writing does not fit in. If teachers are not aware of the different ways that students learn to write, they may not be able to provide the support that students need to succeed.