

Improving Oral Skills through Readers Theatre

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Dialogues, scenes and drama provide a dynamic form in which language skills can be introduced and reinforced. Readers Theatre (RT) is an example of a 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 was designed to investigate the following research question:

“Do EFL learners have positive experiences using RT to improve 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 enhanced the oral skills of EFL learners as they learned to experiment with their voices by varying the pitch and volume to portray the character. RT also boosted their confidence in handling spoken dialogue. We believe that RT is a highly rewarding language learning experience for EFL learners.

RT was first introduced as a minimal theatre in support of literature 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. Basically, readers first read through a piece of literary work and then write a script to produce an original dramatic production. RT will benefit EFL learners because it has the following key features:

- a. No full costume
- b. No full stage sets
- c. No full memorisation

According to Hill (1990:13), 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 (1987:22) 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 uninvolved) 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 are generally aware of their handicap in English oral proficiency and are looking for a secure starting point. Berlinger (2000:1) recognising the benefits of scripted dialogues in encouraging English expressions states 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...Because they involve all aspects of language, 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 should 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. In addition, there are also other benefits for students such as reported by Sloyer (1982:4-5):

....their capacity to imagine is extended. Hearing well-written stories reinforce their use of language skills, encourages them to read with avidity, and stimulates concentrated listening.

Wolf (1994:8) 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 enhances the oral skills of EFL learners.

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 are students from the People's Republic of China who were pursuing an Intensive English Course in the Centre for English Language and Communication (CELC), National University of Singapore. The course ran for a period of six months. The second group are student nurses pursuing a three-week intensive Communication Skills course in a health school in Sichuan, China. The study was designed the research question:

“Do EFL learners have positive experiences using RT to improve their oral skills?”

Profile of Chinese students

RT was first carried out as a pilot study among a group of Senior Middle High (SM3) students from the People's Republic of China in the National University of Singapore. 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 study was repeated with 57 PRC student nurses enrolled in an intensive English communication skills course, conducted by Singaporeans teachers in Sichuan, China.

Reasons for using RT in an EFL classroom.

From the beginning of the course, we found that the learners had difficulty in reading and understanding the prescribed passages. There were too many new words for them to handle. 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 slow, passive and dictionary dependent learners. RT was introduced to motivate EFL learners to appreciate expository text, and to help them to gain confidence to talk about the topic they had read.

Method

An expository text on ‘Euthanasia’ was used for this study. Vocabulary was pre-taught. After that, students read the passage individually and discussed their responses to the topic. After students had gained sufficient background knowledge of the topic, they were

put in various groups of three or four. They were then given the task of writing a script on the topic, guided by this scenario:

Mr. Tan See Beng, 51, is afflicted with 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 Seng 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 for writing the script or they may choose to write their own story. After students had finished writing the scripts, they read and rehearsed their roles. When they were ready to perform their scripts, teacher recorded their performance in a tape recorder.

Data Collection

Data was collected from:

1. learners' reflective journals

2. a questionnaire survey of learners' reaction towards the use of RT

Learners' Reflective Journal

Students were told to write a page a day in their journals. However, students were told the journal would not be graded. However they were informed 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' opinion of RT. We also designed five open - ended questions for the teachers to provide us with their observations in using RT in the classroom.

Data Analysis and Discussion

In an attempt to answer our research question on 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. Although journals from this age

group seldom had the very personal, diarylike qualities (Hurlow, 1993), we found that the writings from the journals were reflective and honest. In addition, the information gathered from these entries was cross-validated by comparing them with the results of the student questionnaire survey.

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:

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.

In addition, information from learners' reflective journal was also cross-validated by the student questionnaire survey. There were 57 students who 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 Figure 1 next page).

Figure 1: Survey on Readers Theatre
 1 (strongly disagree); 2 (disagree); 3 (neutral);
 4 (agree); 5 (strongly agree)

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

(RT=Readers Theatre)

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 is a good way of learning spoken English. Whether they were more confident using English through RT 61.4% agreed. 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 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.

We agreed that RT enhanced the oral skills of EFL learners as they learned to experiment with their voices by varying their pitch and volume to portray the character during rehearsals. RT enabled students to concentrate on the elements of voice which carry meaning—for example, accelerating and raising the pitch to suggest excitement. Students also paid more attention to their articulation of words, especially when they were rehearsing their scripts, and even more so when they knew that they had to act out the scripts to an audience. Students also learned to deliver smoother speech, with little pauses or groping for words. This is because repetitive rehearsals of the script increase comprehension

as well as fluency. As students rehearse their scripts, they also learnt to use tone to portray the attitude of the character. For instance, while acting out the line, “Doctor! Doctor! How’s my brother?” the student used an anxious tone to convey the mood of the character while another student was able to convey grief when reading the line, “Go ahead, give him the jab. Let him go painlessly.”

In addition, RT also built up the confidence of EFL learners to handle spoken dialogue. McRae (1985:7) 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. Previously, we found that most of our 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 learned to transform indirect speech into direct speech, for example:

Indirect speech: Jim told Tom that he is in deep agony. His head is hurting him. He told Jim to let him die if he really want to do something for him.

Direct speech: Jim: I am in deep agony. My head is hurting me. If you really want to do something for me, please let me die!

Conclusion

From the response of both students and teachers, there is no doubt that EFL students have a positive response to using RT to improve their oral skills. At the same time, RT also helps 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 have no familiarity with theatre as a genre, or they may not have the linguistic ability to produce their own scripts. In the case of EFL learners who had just been immersed in a totally English-speaking environment, getting them to write scripts was a rather tedious task. The teacher had to proofread and edit their scripts several times before they were ready to perform. Some degree of initial inhibition and resistance to acting was encountered. However, despite these limitations, RT has the potential to become a valuable technique in mastering oral English, especially with intermediate and advanced EFL learners.

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