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The Bridge Between Phonological Awareness and Literacy

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This study focuses on the effectiveness of Readers Theater in increasing phonological awareness of elementary students in Japan. It seems clear that there are two major predictors of early literacy in alphabetic languages: letter knowledge and phonological awareness (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). However, it may be difficult to apply this insight to the Japanese EFL context, because exposure to English sounds and letters is limited even in textbooks. Reading activities, such as Readers Theater, are suggested to help increase exposure to spoken and written English. Readers Theater is an approach that requires repeated reading focusing on conveying meaning to the audience (Young & Rasinski, 2009). This study, involving 192 third-through fifth-grade students at a public elementary school, uses quantitative data to demonstrate the effects of Readers Theater on phonological awareness and attitudes towards English learning.

本研究では、日本の小学生に音韻認識を発達させる方法を調査し、評価する。アルファベット言語の初期の読み書き能力には、文字の知識と音韻認識という 2 つの主要な予測因子があることが明らかである (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998)。しかし日本の英語教育の文脈では、教科書でも英語の音や文字に触れる機会が限られているため、この洞察を適用するのは難しいだろう。リーダーズシアターなどの音読活動は、話されたり書かれたりした英語に接する機会を増やすのに役立つと考えられる。リーダーズシアターは、意味を観客に伝えることに重点を置いて繰り返し読むことを必要とするアプローチである (Young and Rasinski, 2009)。本研究は、公立小学校の3年生から5年生192名を対象として、リーダーズシアターが音韻認識と英語学習への態度に及ぼす効果を量的データを用いて実証する。

S ince the current curriculum guidelines were issued in 2017, English has been introduced as a mandatory subject for Grades five and six as "Foreign Language" and for Grades three and four as "Foreign Language Activities." Both the previous and current

curriculum guidelines make mention of "sounds and letters," indicating an emphasis on phonological awareness by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Moreover, although "reading" has been newly included in the curriculum guidelines, current textbooks appear to lack sufficient English texts for effective practice.

The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of oral reading practice along with regular lessons, including instruction of phonological awareness and letter knowledge, for third to fifth graders in a public elementary school in Japan. Students in the third and early fourth grades tend to excel at imitating the sounds they hear and seem indifferent to hearing words they cannot comprehend (Kuno et al., 2008; Watanabe et al., 2010). In late fourth grade, students enter a stage in which students begin to apply logic and reason to their learning (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). It is assumed thus, that third grade is the ideal time to start providing extensive exposure to English sounds to be able to analytically recognize the phonological features of English in the fourth and fifth grades.

Previous Literature

Phonological Awareness

Many researchers have emphasized the crucial role of phonological awareness and letter knowledge in early literacy in alphabetic languages (Stahl & Murray, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Phonological awareness refers to sensitivity to the sound structure of spoken words (Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Gillon (2018) categorized phonological awareness into three subskills, noting that phoneme awareness is more complex than syllable and onset-rime awareness. A phoneme, as defined by Yopp and Yopp (2000), is the smallest unit of sound carrying meaning in a word. The National Reading Panel in the US (2000) asserted that phonemic awareness instruction benefits early literacy and should precede phonics instruction. Maclean et al. (1987) conducted a longitudinal study demonstrating a strong correlation between nursery rhyme knowledge and



phonological awareness, using nursery rhymes like "Humpty Dumpty," "Baa-baa Black Sheep," "Hickory Dickory Dock," "Jack and Jill," and "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." Allen-Tamai (2019) suggested integrating letter names and shapes into phonological awareness instruction for young learners in Japanese EFL contexts, as letter knowledge correlates with phonological skills, both essential for early literacy, particularly in non-alphabetic languages.

Readers Theater

The National Reading Panel (2000) supported oral reading fluency instruction for enhancing reading achievement. Readers Theater, as recommended by Young et al. (2019), prioritized prosodic elements over speed to enhance fluency. This approach focused on conveying meaning through rhythm and intonation, emphasizing repeated practice. Young and Rasinski (2009) asserted its effectiveness for all students, regardless of proficiency levels, provided they possess basic reading skills.

Kerry-Moran (2006) expanded the use of Readers Theater to emergent readers, focusing on how Readers Theater benefits young readers in areas of literacy development. It was stated in the study that Readers Theater motivated young learners to reread the script multiple times in order to perform well in front of their audience. It suggests some tips for implementation, including steps that encourage engagement, such as choosing the appropriate script and preparing the audience for the performance.

Van Amelsvoort (2020) stressed the importance of Readers Theater in the Japanese EFL context indicating that Japanese students need reading training because the Japanese language is not alphabetic and students have limited exposure to English. It was also stated in the study that Readers Theater can facilitate learners' phonological awareness through nursery rhymes and short stories especially for young learners. It is worth noting that variations in capitalization, as well as the use of apostrophes, exist among researchers regarding the term "Readers Theater." However, in this paper, the convention of capitalizing the initial letters is employed.

Research Questions

Based on this theoretical background, this study investigates the efficacy of Readers Theater for Japanese EFL elementary school students. If the present study can set a precedent for teaching young learners in the Japanese EFL context, it may help future research in this area. The research explores the following research questions:

- RQ1 Does Readers Theater improve phonological awareness in Japanese elementary school students?
- RQ2 Does Readers Theater have a positive impact on attitudes towards English learning?

Method

Participants

All participants in the study gave informed consent to the researcher, and the project was cleared with the school's institutional review board. There were a total of 192 participants from third to fifth grade in a public elementary school in the Kanto region, consisting of 67 third graders, 59 fourth graders, and 66 fifth graders, with 95 boys and 97 girls, respectively.

For third- and fourth grade students, there was a weekly English class called "Foreign Language Activities," which focused on speaking and listening skills. Additionally, *romaji* reading and writing skills were taught during Japanese lessons by their homeroom teachers. Some students mastered *romaji* rules and demonstrated proficient reading and writing abilities, while others faced challenges. As for fifth-grade students, they attended "Foreign Language" English classes twice a week, primarily focusing on listening and speaking, with less emphasis on reading and writing. All English classes were co-taught by a Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) and an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT).

Procedure for Implementation of Readers Theatre

The lessons on Readers Theater were conducted by the JTE and the ALT during regular English classes. Phonological awareness instruction, such as recitation of nursery rhymes, was conducted in 15-minute module lessons from April 2022 to March 2023. These modules occasionally included additional activities aimed at teaching students how to write their names and the names of places in Hepburn-style *romaji* as part of letter knowledge instruction. Alongside phonological awareness, the students were immersed in Readers Theater from January to March 2023.

Table 1 outlines the general schedule of instruction for phonological awareness and Readers Theater, along with student assessment using three types of pre- and posttests and a post-course questionnaire. Pretests for the letter recognition (LR) test and the name writing (NW) test were administered in July to third and fourth graders after instruction on letter and *romaji* learning. Fifth graders, who had already covered these



topics, took the tests in April. These assessments were conducted in regular classrooms, with speakers attached to the electronic blackboards used for the listening tests. Considering that fifth graders already had their first exposure to English learning in third grade, the sound categorization (SC) test was administered to them in December and to third and fourth graders in January, following the aforementioned two tests. Posttests for all three were conducted in March for students in third, fourth, and fifth grade. Furthermore, a post-course questionnaire was conducted to collect data on students' attitudes towards English learning.

Table 1 *General Schedule of Instruction and Assessment*

Month / Grade	3 to 5	3 & 4	5
April			Pretest: LR & NW
		Alphabet Instruction (U6)	
July		Romaji Instruction (in Japanese class)	
	Rhyme	Pretest: LR & NW	
Sep-Dec	Time	PA instruction	
Dec & Jan		Pretest: SC	
		*Grades 3&4: Jan, Grade 6: Dec	
Jan-Mar		Instruction: RT	Instruction: RT
Mar		Posttest: LR, NW, & SC, Post-course que	estionnaire

Note. LR: letter recognition, NW: name writing, SC: sound categorization,

RT: Readers Theater, PA: phonological awareness

Romaji instruction in Japanese language class was 5 hours a year for third graders mainly in *kunrei* style, and 2 hours a year for fourth graders as an introduction to Hepburn style. The current curriculum guidelines suggest Hepburn style for writing text that is likely used when communicating with people from other countries, for example, place names and official names written on passports. Table 2 shows examples of differences in *romaji* in *kunrei* style and Hepburn style.

 Table 2

 Examples of Romaji in Kunrei style and Hepburn style

Kunrei style	susi	Huzi	Tiba	Honma
Hepburn style	sushi	Fuji	Chiba	Homma

Rhyme Time

Throughout the school year, students participated in "Rhyme Time," aimed at exposing them to English sounds and rhythms through nursery rhymes. This activity was integrated into a 15-minute module during each English class and for 2-3 minutes during daily morning sessions to ensure ample exposure. The syllabus was divided into two parts: recitation and singing. Every two weeks, a new nursery rhyme was introduced, totaling 11 rhymes over the school year. Table 3 displays the nursery rhymes recited during "Rhyme Time," including five from the study conducted by Maclean et al. (1987). Furthermore, some other classic or new rhymes were introduced. One was "One, Two, Buckle My Shoe," used to practice numbers, and showed students that the same letter may make different sounds in English: for example, the *E*s in "one" and "three" are pronounced differently. Another rhyme was made by Kuno (1983). This rhyme is unique in helping students practice the alphabet with rhythm.

 Table 3

 Rhyme Time: Nursery Rhymes Used During Sessions

	,		
Baa Baa Black Sheep	Rain Rain Go Away	Hey Diddle Diddle	Twinkle Twinkle Little Star
Humpty Dumpty	Jack and Jill	Itsy Bitsy Spider	Hickory Dickory Dock
Row Row Row Your Boat	Teddy Bear Teddy Bear	Five Little Monkeys	

Readers Theatre Implementation Across Grade Levels

This section will demonstrate how Readers Theater was conducted across different grade levels. Students in grades three to five performed short plays based on vocabulary and grammar points from their textbook units. When planning unit instruction, two units were sometimes combined to create a single script, while other times, a picture



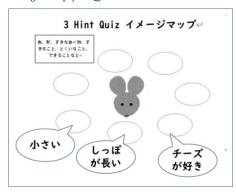
book was introduced to complement the learning content. Picture books, rich in images, help children comprehend the story and provide context. Additionally, fifth graders were expected to deliver speeches at the end of each unit, with teaching plans developed in collaboration with Readers Theater activities.

Third Graders Practice with Readers Theater: Introducing the Chinese Zodiac

This section highlights the innovative activities conducted by third graders, focusing on their skit performances aimed at introducing the Chinese zodiac animals to their homeroom teacher.

The final unit of their textbook involved a hide-and-seek story featuring the Chinese zodiac animals, while the preceding unit focused on quizzes such as three-hint quizzes. Combining these units, students brainstormed ways to describe animals using hints. Split into 13 groups, they were assigned a zodiac animal or a cat and asked to create hints based on Figure 1. For instance, a mouse was described as small and fond of cheese.

Figure 1
Image Map for Quiz



Students created their own short skits by giving hints and guessing which animal another student was gesturing. With help from the JTE and the ALT, they then developed these skits into Readers Theater scripts. As third graders are beginners in English, they practiced by shadowing or repeating after the teachers. Once accustomed to reciting the texts, the written scripts with visual aids were shown to the students, as in Figure 2, to act out. Some visual aids including American Sign Language gestures were included to

convey meaning to students, because most Japanese third graders are unable to recognize all the letters of the alphabet. Students sang or recited a related nursery rhyme before or after some skits depending on the animal, such as "Hickory Dickory Dock" featuring a mouse before a mouse skit.

Figure 2
Example of Script

JE: Who is the first?
I see something small.

Who are you? A hint, please.

Mouse: I have a long tail.

JE: Are you a mouse?

Mouse: Yes, I am. Yes, I am. I'm a mouse!

Fourth Graders Practice with Readers Theater: Daily Routines in Focus

In fourth-grade classes, students performed skits introducing daily routines. These skits incorporated the lyrics of the song "This is the Way" from the final unit of their textbook to depict daily routines. Students used American Sign Language to introduce activities such as "wake up" or "eat my toast." The Readers Theater script was developed by integrating students' ideas into the unit's content. Initially, students practiced the script by shadowing the teacher. Once they were sufficiently familiar with the expressions, students were paired up. They then delivered lines with gestures and recited rhymes such as "One, Two, Buckle My Shoe." These performances were conducted in English in front of their homeroom teacher. The use of American Sign Language by fourth-grade students aimed to aid their English language acquisition, as they were not yet proficient in reading English, and the gestures served as cues to recall English vocabulary.



Fifth Grade Practice with Readers Theater: Exploring Prepositions Through Performance

In fifth-grade classes, students performed skits introducing prepositions denoting locations. The contents of Unit 5 of their textbook and the book "Where's Spot?" written by Eric Hill were combined. The book focuses on teaching spatial concepts such as *on*, *in*, *by*, and *under* that were part of a unit in the textbook where many students had difficulty recognizing. Students worked in groups of four to create and present original pages for "Where's Spot?" using furniture introduced or magnets. Showing the dark side, students could ask if Spot was in a particular location, then reveal the animal on the other side. Each student group presented their skits while showing the pages they created on a computer.

Practice Using Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Readers Theater activities were supported by the use of ICT tools, for facilitating learning and assessment. It was useful in distributing pre-recorded sound sources, enabling students to practice pronunciation through listening exercises. Additionally, computers equipped with the "Flip" application proved useful in recording and reviewing their own performances. Recorded videos were also invaluable tools in identifying recurring errors among students, especially in large classes, where it was difficult to provide immediate feedback to all students.

Assessment and Questionnaire

The Tests Used

To measure students' abilities related to phonological awareness, three types of tests were administered across all grade levels: the sound categorization, letter recognition, and name writing tests. Instructions for these tests were provided in Japanese. Each test was conducted both before and after the intervention, and the results of both pre- and posttests will be discussed later in this section. It is noteworthy that the details of these tests are appended in Appendix A.

1. The *Sound Categorization Test* (SC) was a 15-minute test adapted from Kirtley et al. (1989) and Ikeda (2015). It consists of 20 recognition tasks for beginning sounds and ending sounds of words, involving the identification of the "odd-one-out" word in sets of three consonant-vowel-consonant pattern words like "mop". This test was conducted before and after Readers Theater instruction to measure the students' cognitive improvement in their perception associated with phonological awareness.

- 2. The *Letter Recognition Test* (LR) was a 10-minute test adapted from Ikeda (2015). It consists of tasks recognizing shapes and names of lower-case letters by listening to twenty letter names, and identifying the correct letter from five choices. Students generally learn upper-case letters first, and lower-case letters are more difficult for them to recognize although they are much more frequent in texts (Allen-Tamai, 2019).
- 3. The *Name Writing Test* (NW) requires students to write their first and last names in Hepburn-style *romaji* (Watanabe, 2020). A five-point scale for scoring was used by assessors, taking into account basic aspects of English orthography, such as initial capitalization, letter spacing, and consistency of letter height and shape. 0 points were awarded for no response or nothing correct, 1 point for a correct initial letter, 1 point for correct capitalization, 1 point for a correct letter besides the initial letter, 1 point for correct use of spacing, and 1 point for correct spelling overall. The results are discussed in the "Results and Discussion" section.

Post-course Questionnaire

A post-course questionnaire was administered to assess students' perceptions of their English learning attitudes as a result of participating in the program. Students rated their attitudes using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire consisted of four questions: 1) *Enjoyment*: 1 found Readers Theater activity enjoyable; 2) *Engagement*: During this program, I asked my friends or teachers when I did not understand something; 3) *Dedication*: I made an effort to practice during the program; and 4) *Confidence*: I feel more confident speaking English than before the program. The results are presented in the next section, and a copy is attached in Appendix B.

Results and Discussion

The statistical analysis tool "HAD" (Shimizu, 2016) facilitated data analysis. It is a free statistical analysis tool that operates within Excel, enabling users to conduct various analyses.

Table 4 shows the results of the t-tests performed for all pretests and posttests. For third graders, the mean score for the SC test increased from 61.16 to 63.81, showing no statistically significant difference ($p \ge .05$). However, the mean score difference for LR was from 63.23 to 80.62 with a significant difference of p < .001. Meanwhile, mean scores for NW increased significantly from 4.43 to 7.90, with significance at p < .001. For fourth



graders, there were significant differences on all tests, with SC means from 62.75 to 69.70 (p < .005), and from 83.91 to 90.09 for LR (p < .01), and from 7.06 to 8.53 for NW (p < .001). For fifth graders, there was a significant difference in the mean scores for SC from 65.39 to 70.20 (p < .01). For LR, there was no significant difference from 92.54 to 93.15, indicating a ceiling effect, but a significant difference for NW from 8.38 to 8.86 at p < .05.

The summarized results from Table 4 indicated a significant improvement in students' phonological awareness, particularly in sound categorization and letter recognition. Despite third graders not showing a statistically significant difference in SC scores (p \geq .05), there was a notable increase in LR scores from pre- to posttest (p< .001), along with significant improvements in name writing scores (p < .001). Fourth-graders demonstrated substantial enhancements in SC, LR, and NW scores (p < .005, p < .01, p <

0.001, respectively), while fifth graders showed significant advancements in SC scores (p < .01). However, LR scores did not show a significant difference (p \ge .05), and NW scores revealed only a slight increase (p < .05).

Readers Theater: Enhancing Phonological Awareness

The results suggested that Readers Theater effectively enhanced students' phonological awareness, particularly in sound categorization and letter recognition. Fourth graders demonstrated the most significant improvement, while some effect was also observed in third and fifth graders. This highlights the importance of early intervention in cultivating phonological awareness skills and underscores potential variations in the effectiveness of interventions across different grade levels.

Table 4
All Pre- and Posttest Results for Each Grade Students

G3	SC	LR	NW	G4
	Mean	Mean	Mean	
Pre-	61.16	63.23	4.43	Pre-
Post-	63.81	80.62	7.90	Post-
p value	.212	.000	.000	p value
n	67	66	65	n

G4	SC	LR	NW
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Pre-	62.75	83.91	7.06
Post-	69.70	90.09	8.53
p value	.003	.001	.000
n	59	55	53

G5	SC	LR	NW
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Pre-	65.39	92.54	8.38
Post-	70.20	93.15	8.86
p value	.004	.450	.018
N	64	65	66

Note. SC: sound categorization test, LR: letter recognition test, NW: name writing test

Table 5
Post-course Questionnaire Results for all Grade Levels

3rd-grade				
	n	Mean	Median	SD
E1	67	4.46	5.00	0.88
E2	67	4.39	5.00	0.85
D	67	4.40	5.00	1.00
С	67	4.52	5.00	0.80

4th-grade				
	n	Mean	Median	SD
E1	59	4.14	4.00	1.12
E2	59	4.05	4.00	1.07
D	59	4.24	5.00	1.07
С	59	4.15	4.00	1.05

5th-grade				
	n	Mean	Median	SD
E1	66	4.05	4.00	1.12
E2	66	4.26	4.00	1.00
D	66	4.00	4.00	1.20
C	66	3.85	4.00	1.34

Note. E1: enjoyment, E2: engagement, D: dedication, C: confidence



These findings emphasize the importance of considering both the frequency of exposure to foreign languages and the developmental stage of students when designing language learning interventions. It is apparent that a combination of targeted instruction and developmental appropriateness plays a pivotal role in determining the efficacy of such interventions Consequently, it is reasonable to assert that research question 1 is affirmed.

Readers Theater: Impact On Student Attitude

Table 5 presents a summary of the post-course questionnaire conducted to examine the effects of Readers Theater on students' attitudes in learning English. For third graders, the mean scores were 4.46 for enjoyment, 4.39 for engagement, 4.40 for dedication, and 4.52 for confidence. For fourth graders, the mean scores were 4.14 for enjoyment, 4.05 for engagement, 4.24 for dedication, and 4.15 for confidence. For fifth graders, the mean scores were 4.05 for enjoyment, 4.26 for engagement, 4.00 for dedication, and 3.85 for confidence.

The summary suggested variation in average scores across third, fourth, and fifth grades, with each generally showing relatively high scores. Specific trends are indicated for each grade level. Third graders have the highest scores, indicating their enjoyment and increased confidence in participating in Readers Theater activities. This potentially suggests the beneficial effects of early exposure to such experiences. Fourth graders exhibit slightly lower scores, possibly due to the learning content becoming more advanced despite English classes being only once a week. Moreover, engagement, especially, is the lowest among the three grades. This can also be attributed to the limited opportunities for students to ask questions to teachers and friends during the once-a-week class. Fifth graders demonstrate the lowest scores in all items except for engagement, which could be attributed to the increased complexity of the content and developmental stage typically around the age of 11. Particularly notable is the low confidence, which may stem from comparisons with oneself and peers. It is important to acknowledge that this survey solely comprises a post-course questionnaire, precluding the comparison of pre- and post-course attitudes. Nonetheless, it is plausible that Readers Theatre has positively influenced students' attitudes towards English learning, aligning with Research Question 2.

Implications

The findings from this study suggested that, for Japanese elementary school students, Readers Theater is effective on two aspects: phonological awareness and motivation. The

key components were that the program was both meaningful and slightly challenging. Activities become more meaningful when there is an audience, such as the homeroom teacher because students practice reading aloud in hopes of performing well in front of others (Moran, 2006). Moreover, students seem to enjoy a challenge. This can be achieved by creating scripts that utilize subject matter from textbooks or by combining them with stories from picture books that have similar vocabulary and grammar points. This may provide the following advantages: it encourages awareness of the phonological features of communication, has low learning burden, and allows students to see and feel how words are used in other contexts (Van Amelsvoort, 2020).

Conclusion

The present study demonstrated the potential for Readers Theater to enhance phonological awareness and attitudes toward learning English. Grade three students can enjoy hearing and imitating sounds, while students in grades four and five are able to notice phonological features of English analytically. In addition, students from grades three to five can be familiarized with letters, a first step toward becoming independent readers. Therefore, it can be concluded that Readers Theater is an appropriate bridge between phonological awareness and literacy for grades three to five students to become independent readers.

Bio Data

Naomi Watanabe is the head English teacher at Higashi Elementary School in Tsukuba. After teaching English in junior high school for 14 years, she transitioned to teaching elementary school. Teaching at both levels sparked her interest in phonological awareness. She earned her master's degree from Tsuda University in 2020. Her current research interests include early literacy and prosody.

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Appendix A

えい語	聞こえ	.度	年		組	畨	名前			
	えい辞	を聞い	て, ち:	がう音	がふく	まれる	ものを	しらびま	しょう	•
例題		番目	2番目	3番目		例題		番目	2番目	3番目
(れいた	(**)	ab	l,	3		(れい	だい)	ð	L.	う
	Т	a	W	う	1		-1	あ	LV.	ì
	2	あ	11	3	1		2	あ	1,	3
N+ I	3	あ	1,	3	1	n" -1 5	3	あ	"	う
	4	あ	1,	う	1		4	あ	"	3
	5	ab	r,	ĵ]		5	あ	i,	ì
	1	あ	L)	ĵ	1		1	あ	۲,	ĵ
N'-⊦2	2	あ	61	う	1		2	ab	۲,	う
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) 123		字(へ	ポン式	() で自	分の名	前	を書:	きましょ	ò.			



Copy of the Three Tests Used

● 発表が楽しかった。	1	2	3	4	
わからないところは、先生や友達に聞いて確かめた。	1	2	3	4	
動 前とくらべて進んで練習をたくさんした。	1	2	3	4	
英語を話すことについて、前より自信ができた。	1	2	3	4	
(2)今回の発表について、楽しかったこと、がんばったことや	や気づいた	ことを	書き	ましょ	う

Appendix B

Copy of Post-course Questionnaire and Its English Translation

O I found readers theater activity enjoyable.	I	2	3	4	Ę
② During this program, I asked my friends or teachers when I didn't understand something.	1	2	3	4	£
I made an effort to practice during the program.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel more confident speaking English than before the program.	1	2	3	4	5
(2) For this presentation, write about what you enjoyed, the insights you gained.	effo	rts y	ou mae	de, an	d t