

The impact of Readers Theatre (RT) in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

Readers Theatre (RT) is a form of group storytelling in which performers read aloud a story using script. In Readers Theatre, dialogues, scenes and drama that approximate real communication provide a dynamic form for language skills to be introduced and reinforced. In creating RT scripts, students increase their knowledge of language structure (vocabulary, syntax and meaning), language use (forms and functions of language use) and the metalinguistic awareness (the ability to talk about language (Hill: 1990). RT was introduced in the EFL classroom to enhance the learning of communication skills. This article will examine whether EFL students have positive experiences using RT in the learning of oral communication skills. The results of the study show that EFL students do have positive experiences in using RT in the learning of communication skills. RT also helped EFL learners to communicate their ideas in a group setting when discussing the script.

Key terms: Readers Theatre, scripts writing, oral skills

1. Introduction

RT is an oral presentation of drama, prose or poetry by two or more readers. Readers first read a story and then transform the story into a script involving several characters. The script is then performed for an intended audience. To portray a character, readers strive for,

“voice flexibility, good articulation, proper pronunciation and projection.” (Sloyer: 1982:4)

RT has been used in various educational settings, especially in the context of ESL/EFL teaching. Liu (2000) explored three phases of RT activities with 14 ESL students in an intermediate L2 writing class in a US university and concluded that RT is a powerful tool in the EFL classroom. Although RT has been adopted in various educational settings, few studies have been conducted to address both its theoretical and pedagogical issues in language classrooms. Wolf (1994:8) states 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 investigate the following research question,

Do EFL students have positive experiences using RT in the learning of oral communication skills?

2. What is Readers Theatre?

RT is an oral presentation of two or more readers. It was originally developed as a means to present literary works in dramatic form. There are four basic steps in RT:

- a) Readers first read a story, and then

- b) make selective and analytical choices in transforming the story into a script through social negotiation,
- c) formulate, practise and refine their interpretations, and
- d) finally perform for an audience, reading aloud from hand-held scripts.

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. RT will benefit EFL students because it has the following key features:

- No full costume is needed.
- No full stage sets
- No full memorisation of speech is involved as the scripts are held during performance.
- Narration provides the framework for dramatic action

(Source: Shepard, A, 1996)

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 and moreover, what spoken language is contained therein often takes the form of unrealistic (and uninvolved) slices of dialogue that have little value in terms of style or humour...Secondly, scripts also offer psychological security to the student.

Since the writing of scripts involves all aspects of language, RT should enable EFL students to acquire language in a real communicative context and allows creativity. RT would help EFL students to improve their oral communication skills. In addition, there are also other benefits for students such as,

his capacity to imagine is extended. Hearing well-written stories reinforce his use of language skills, encourages him to read with avidity, and stimulates concentrated listening. (Sloyer: 1982:4-5)

3. Subject for study

This study was carried out among a class of 28 second-year EFL engineering students attending a course on Effective Communication from the School of Materials Engineering, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore. The class consists of both local as well as foreign students from the PRC, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. The course introduces students to some key communication processes in various situations ranging from intrapersonal, interpersonal and intercultural communication. Students are involved in a range of oral and written activities such as role-play, group interaction and presentation in English. The course runs for a period of 12 weeks. Students attend lessons once a week with each lesson lasting 2 hours.

4. Reasons for using RT in Class

Engineering students in Singapore have always been known to have a low aptitude for language learning, particularly English. In addition, as English is not the mother tongue of students, many were apprehensive of

their spoken English. This fear was also understandable, because at the end of their second year, students have to do an oral presentation for their group project where they will be assessed by their tutor. From past experiences, a majority of students normally experiences problems in articulation when delivering a presentation. This is due to the fact that students experience difficulty in word pronunciation, especially words they were unfamiliar with. In addition, students also tend to speak too fast as they were eager to finish their presentations. RT was adopted to help students to gain confidence in using English to interact in a group setting.

5. How RT was conducted

RT was carried out in the following three stages:

Stage 1 Introducing the topic

Students were first assigned an expository passage on Communication in Groups which is extracted from a chapter of their textbook, Communication Mosaic. An introduction to the field of Communication. The objective of the lesson is to familiarise students with the various types of communication in groups: task communication, procedural communication, climate communication and egocentric communication. However, teachers can use other passages depending on their students' needs and levels.

To introduce the topic, the teacher gives a review of the different types of communication in group interactions. Concepts such as 'Task Communication,' 'Procedural Communication and 'Egocentric Communication' were explained to students. After students had grasped the concepts, they were then instructed to write a script to illustrate a type of communication in a group setting. To familiarise students with script writing, a sample of group communication involving various characters were shown to students. Students were shown the following transcript, which is a proceeding of a meeting held to establish a residential committee in a new housing estate. However, teachers may use other samples depending on the topics they intend to teach. The purpose of the sample is to show students how a script is written and how different characters are being portrayed in a group interaction setting.

| | |
|--------------|--|
| Chairperson: | It's now ten o'clock. Shall we start our meeting? This group is meeting for the first time since the four of us mutually discovered a common interest in developing a residential committee. I'll briefly review the series of informal discussions that led to the formation of this group... |
| Glen: | Thanks for the review. I'd like to add a few things concerning other residential committees (RC) in Singapore. |
| Chairperson: | Sure, go ahead. |
| Glen: | The first residential committee was formed at... |
| Margaret: | Thanks Glen for that background information. I drove to the RC near my home this week and obtained some information that might be helpful in our discussion. |
| Siew Chong: | Why don't we take five minutes to look through the materials Margaret brought? It might stimulate some questions. |
| Zarina: | Why not read it over and get it over with? |
| Verapan: | I disagree. I feel that our time might be better spent if Margaret would just summarise the material and let us read it when we get home. |
| Chairman: | Okay, why don't we take some time to read the materials now so that we can have a more fruitful discussion? |
| Everybody: | Okay. |

After students had finished reading the transcript, they were instructed to write a script to portray a type of communication in a group setting. The teacher can provide a scenario to guide students:

Imagine you are part of a team involved in a communication skills project. The project requires your team to present a critique of a website in class which will be evaluated by your tutor and your classmates. Your team has decided to meet up to discuss how to present a critique of a website. Create a script to reflect procedural communication (Note: Procedural Communication focuses on coordinating members' comments and encourages participation from members). In your script, you should set the mood of the meeting, and shows how individual members and the chairperson contribute to the group discussion.

Stage 2 Writing the script

Students were given some time to negotiate among themselves how they could create a script to portray the type of group communication. Through their negotiation of the different characters, students create lines to illustrate the type of communication setting. A sample of the script written by students is shown below:

Sample of script by students (Note: minor editions by teacher)

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Chairperson : | Good afternoon. Today, we will be discussing topics for the Effective Communication assignment. Just to review this assignment, we are required to do a critique on either a movie, website or books. As the deadline is next week, we have o come to a decision as to what we are going to do. So can I have your suggestions? |
| Alex: | I would like to critique a website on the issue of Iraq war. I feel the website is against Bush' s actions and the claims are not supported by discrete facts. |
| Meng: | Sorry, to interrupt but I have some queries. How sure are you to claim that the website is not supported by discrete facts? Moreover it may be true that Bush's actions are of ill-intentions. Although the facts in the website may not be true, but at least it is so extreme that it's worth discussing. |
| Chong: | I don't think we should choose something that has factual evidence. |
| Chairperson | Ok guys. We must remember that we don't have much time left for argument. What is important now is to decide on a topic to critique on. Glenda, what do you think? |
| Glenda | I myself personally have a suggestion that I would like to open up. Why don't we critique on a movie, " Black Hawk Down?" since it is a movie based on true events. The movie tends to focus on the heroism of American soldiers but all of us know that the Somalia soldiers had died in great numbers. |
| Chairperson: | So far, the suggestions are great and brilliant. Since two of you have disagreed with the first suggestion, so do you have other suggestions? |
| (No response from members) | |
| Chairperson: | Ok, so we have critiques on website on the Iraq War and movies like Black Hawk Down and Super Size Me. All are equally good suggestion. So can all of us go back and research on the topics that we have brought up, bearing in mind of the opinions mentioned in this meeting? Shall we meet up again tomorrow, same time? Is that OK with you? |
| Everybody: | Ok. |

Stage 3 Rehearsing the Speech

After students had finished writing the script, they were told by the teacher they had to act out their scripts before the class. Thus, students had to read and rehearse their roles several times before they could perform before an audience. While reading their own individual lines, the importance of reading meaningfully, with vocal variety, clarity and force to bring out the character was stressed. 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.

6. Data Collection

A questionnaire survey was conducted after the RT activity. The survey consisted of ten Likert-scale statements designed to explicitly elicit students' opinions of RT. The survey was aimed at investigating whether students have positive experiences with RT in learning oral communication skills. However students were not told that the activity is RT so as to avoid any biasness in their response in the survey.

7. Results

28 students completed the questionnaires. Students responses were tabulated into percentages, which were rounded off so that they reflect 100% (see table below).

Survey on Readers Theatre

| Statement | 1 strongly disagree | 2 disagree | 3 neutral | 4 agree |
|---|---------------------------|---------------|--------------|------------|
| 1. I enjoyed this activity | 0% | 0% | 29% | 71% |
| 2. The lesson is more interesting as it involves acting out the scripts | 0% | 0% | 14% | 86% |
| 3. I learnt how to improve my oral communication when I acted out the script | 0% | 0% | 21.4% | 78.6% |
| 4. Acting out the scripts helped me understand the lesson on group communication | 0% | 0% | 25% | 75% |
| 5. Writing the script is not difficult | 0% | 21% | 58% | 21% |
| 6. I enjoyed working with my friends in writing and performing the scripts | 0% | 0% | 7.2% | 92.8% |
| 7. I did not learn about group communication through the activity | 14% | 36% | 43% | 7% |
| 8. After watching my friends perform, I learnt about the problems in group communication compared to reading the textbook | 0% | 4% | 14% | 82% |
| 9. This activity made no difference in the way I understand the lesson on group communication | 12% | 57% | 21% | 10% |
| 10. I feel more motivated to read more about the topic after acting out the script | 0% | 3% | 57% | 40% |

In response to whether students have positive experiences with RT, 71 % of students agreed that they enjoyed the activity and 86% think the lesson is more interesting as it involves acting out the scripts. About 92.8% of students agreed that they enjoyed working with their friends in writing and performing the scripts. This shows that a majority of students in the class had no difficulty in accepting RT, a drama activity in their learning of oral communication skills.

Students also have positive response on the use of RT as a tool to help them improve their oral communication skills. About 78.6% of students confessed they learnt how to improve their oral communication when they acted out their scripts. This shows that RT can be a powerful tool for students to improve their oral

communication skills.

Moreover, RT also motivated students to learn a topic on group communication. About 40 % of students felt they were more motivated to read about the topic on group communication after acting out the script. Only a small percentage (3%) disagreed that they were more motivated to read more about the topic after acting out the script. One major reason why RT was not able to motivate some students to read the textbook could be due to the heavy workload in their engineering curriculum. However, it is interesting to note that about 82% of students agreed that RT is a better way of learning about the problems in group communication compared to reading the textbook.

In an attempt to investigate whether RT had made any impact on students' learning, some positive comments from students were elicited:

(Note: minor editions have been done to retain authenticity)

Student 1

I feel that this tutorial is very interesting. It is different from any other tutorials where the tutors do the talking.

Student 2

This activity has made me realise the importance of oral presentation in the future. The power it can summon is enormous. Thank You!

Student 3

From my friends' performance, I realise the importance of using pitch, speed, and volume to improve my presentation skills.

Student 4

This activity has made me realise the importance of oral presentation. The power RT is quite good for us because we can work in a group to write and speak and it's really very effective to improve our presentation skills.

Student 5

I like this method to learn English. If you are an actor, you will really think about your expressions when you are performing. I asked myself these questions, "How can I perform like an actor? How can I express myself naturally?" It's interesting.

Student 6

I really like to write the script and perform in class, not just for fun. It helps to improve my spoken English. It gives me the opportunity to talk about a topic that is applicable in my life.

Student 7

I think it's a good way to learn writing and spoken English. It is also a good way to learn communicating with others.

The results of the survey show that with RT, students began to show a greater interest in appreciating their

course on Effective Communication. When RT was introduced, there were general observations of active participation the lessons. The teacher also observed that students began to enjoy negotiating their script to illustrate the type of communication in a group setting. A lot of discussions were generated during the lessons as students create various characters to portray the different characters in a group interaction setting. 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 (Berlinger 2000). 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.

8. Discussion

RT enhances the oral communication 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 as 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 oral communication. 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.

9. Recommendations

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. The following are some tips for conducting RT in the classroom:

- i. The teacher needs to ensure that every student is involved by getting students to create sufficient characters relating to the topic. The teacher may include the role of a narrator to create the atmosphere for the play. A narrator can also present the topic or theme for the script. For instance, if the lesson is on managing conflict in a group meeting, the narrator may say,

Have you been involved in a conflict when communicating with your friends in a group setting? How did you manage to resolve the conflict? Today, our Readers Theatre will show you how a conflict arises during a group meeting and how it can be resolved.

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

10. Conclusion

From the results of the survey, there is little doubt that EFL students do have positive experiences in using RT in the learning of communication skills. RT also helped EFL learners to communicate their ideas in a group setting when discussing the script. At the same time, RT also helped students to experience the satisfaction of communicating their ideas through performing before an audience.

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 linguistic 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 would be a rather tedious task. The teacher has to proofread and edit their scripts several times before they are ready to perform. Some degree of initial inhibition and resistance to acting would be encountered by some students. 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.

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