READERS THEATER AS A TICKET TO MORE THAN READING FLUENCY: A STUDY OF STUDENT INTERACTION AND PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a study which investigates Taiwanese EFL students’ interaction in Readers Theater (RT) activities and their perception of using RT in English learning. Thirty-five junior high school students from one class participated in the study in which RT was implemented for 15 weeks. The instructor observed the students’ interaction, videotaped students practicing, and interviewed eight selected students for four times each during the semester. Results show that through RT activities, students developed a more positive outlook on English learning, perceived themselves to improve in pronunciation and reading fluency, and developed better relationship with peers. Two special cases are described to highlight RT’s effect on students with poor proficiency and low motivation. With regard to future implementation of RT in junior high school classrooms, the study found that more attention to vocabulary in script, skillful grouping, and appropriate instructor intervention are crucial for successful implementation of RT.

Keywords: Readers Theater, motivation, interaction, perception

Introduction

Readers Theater (RT) has been much discussed for more than a decade. RT is widely believed to be a motivating way to enhance students’ oral reading fluency and to be equally beneficial to both low and high proficiency students (Martinez et al, 1999; Rasinski, 2003; Walker, 1996; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Although many studies have been conducted to provide
evidence to the beneficial effect of RT, most studies used elementary school students or early readers as participants and discussed the beneficial effects of RT mainly from a quantitative point of view. Therefore, the present study intends to investigate the effect of RT in an EFL junior high school and to look closely at students’ interaction and perception of RT during the entire implementation process. Using instructor’s notes and student interview responses to document student interaction during the RT process, this paper attempts to provide further evidence on the effect of RT from a qualitative perspective and to provide reference for future implementation of RT. In addition, two special cases are discussed to highlight the effect of RT on low-proficiency and poorly-motivated students.

Related Literature

1. Definition of Readers Theater

Readers Theater is a group presentation of a script that is read aloud. It is a minimal theatrical production that requires expression of meaning and emotion through fluent readings of stories, poems, chants, or rhymes. RT differs from the traditional form of theater or role play in that the readers are not expected to memorize the lines or act out a script. Rather, the performers read directly from the script on the stage because the emphasis is placed almost solely on oral interpretation of the text rather than theatrical effect achieved through other devices. Elaborate costumes, scenery, and props are therefore seldom required, and very little physical movement is involved (Moran, 2006). As the readers read the script, they use appropriate facial expression, intonation and small gestures to convey a character’s feelings. In other words, the readers are expected to rely on their voices to express meaning, to share their understanding of the characters, or to bring the characters to life (Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Flynn, 2004; Manning & Manning, 1995; Martinez et al, 1999; Moran, 2006; Rinehart, 1999; Worthy & Prater, 2002; R. H. Yopp & H. K. Yopp, 2003).

2. Instructional Benefits of Readers Theater

Readers Theater has been widely praised for its potential instructional benefits, mainly in increasing reading fluency and reading motivation, fostering social skills, and reducing anxiety. Researchers proposed that through repeated reading, dramatic interpretation of text, and performance, RT has a great potential for improving reading fluency (Keehn, 2003; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Moran, 2006), which is usually considered a key contributor to reading
proficiency and overall academic achievement (Rasinski, et al., 2005). RT has therefore been characterized as a “ticket to fluency” (Martinez et al., 1999). Some studies indicate that implementation of RT significantly increased students’ oral reading fluency in terms of reading rate measured by the number of words read correctly per minute (Casey & Chamberlain, 2006; Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Martinez et al., 1999; Rinehart, 1999). Other studies show that in addition to reading rate, RT also improved students’ oral reading in expression, pitch, stress and intonation (Clark, 2006; Kozub, 2000; Pinnell et al., 1995; Rizopoulos, 2004; Shepard, 2004; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Studies of RT on EFL students also indicate that RT improved students’ oral reading fluency in terms of reading rate, accuracy, and comprehension (Chen, 2006; Hung, 2004; Huang, 2007; Yang, 2006).

Another benefit of RT is increasing reading motivation. Motivation to read is often found to correlate positively with the amount and outcome of reading (Mori, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sweet & Guthrie, 1996). RT encourages students to read expressively, to read for understanding, and to rehearse in order to put on a successful performance. The performance itself provides strong intrinsic motivation for students to read the scripts repeatedly, and such motivation was often found to extend to new reading materials (Fink, 2006; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Rizopoulos, 2004; Sloyer, 2003).

Such a motivating effect was also found to benefit students with poor reading proficiency as well. Some studies have reported increased motivation, self-confidence, and level of engagement in literacy events in challenged or resistant readers after implementation of RT in class (Bidwell, 1990; Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Swallow, 2008; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Lengeling, Malarcher and Mills (1995) recommended using RT to help EFL students, and positive results have been reported in improving EFL students’ motivation to read (Chen, 2006; Huang, 2007; Yang, 2006). Nevertheless, a few studies found that RT might favor the high achievers. For example, Hung (2008) reported that though RT was effective in reducing students’ anxiety overall, the beneficial impact on low achievers was not as evident as that on the high achievers.

In addition to fluency and motivation, RT is also believed to help enhance social skills and lower anxiety through teamwork. In typical RT procedure, lines are distributed among group members, and group members practice and rehearse as a team to attain better dramatic effect. Therefore, less skilled or struggling readers who have difficulty with word recognition or pronunciation have the opportunity to receive fluency support from more capable readers. To create an effective performance, all readers must remain focused on the script, pay attention to the lines, and strive to express the emotions embedded in the text. Black and Stave (2007) mentioned that struggling students often benefit much from RT because of the act of learning
as well as the development of interpersonal, social, and collaborative skills. Uthman (2002) reported that after RT practices, poorly-motivated students who feared reading aloud showed enthusiasm for reading. An even more important effect reported in the study was that these students experienced less anxiety about reading out loud because they were so willing to help each other during the rehearsals. Studies of RT instruction on EFL students also showed a lower level of foreign language learning anxiety after RT activities (Chang, 2008; Huang, 2007; Hung, 2008). Due to the instructional potentials discussed above, researchers have suggested that instructors use RT as “a regular instructional activity rather than [something] limited to special occasions” (Worthy & Prater, 2002, p. 294) to achieve a longer-standing effect on students’ learning process.

To provide further evidence on the instructional benefits of RT, the present study examines RT implementation in an EFL junior high school from both instructor’s and students’ perspectives. A close look at the student’ interactions and responses in the RT process is expected to provide valuable practical reference for instructors interested in including RT activities in their future instruction.

Method

1. Participants

Thirty-five seventh graders participated in the study. These students were from one intact class in a junior high school in Taipei city. Their average English grade of the previous semester was 82.9 out of 100, and their average score of a mock exam of the Basic Competence Test administered before the study was 40.8 out of 60. Readers Theater was implemented every week for a semester during library time (one class period per week).

2. Reading Materials

The study used Short Stories for Comprehension published by Longman for RT practice. Students used scripts adapted by the instructor for group RT practice. The book was chosen for three reasons. First, the vocabulary level (within 1,200 words of the basic vocabulary) was close to the level of seventh graders. Second, the length of the 15 short stories, about two minutes long for oral reading, was appropriate for RT practice within the 45 minutes of class time. Third, all stories in the book were light and humorous enough to appeal to seventh graders. Since the students already had two periods of regular English class each week in which they were taught articles in the
English textbook, the instructor intended to give the students a different English learning experience in the library time not only to improve their English but to help them enjoy learning more.

3. Procedure

Readers Theater was implemented in the class for 15 weeks (February to June 2008). Each class lasted for 45 minutes. The students were introduced to RT in the first week and given a very short script to briefly experience group reading practice. The instructor explained what RT meant, and then the students watched videos of RT performance and RT contests in Taiwan. From the second week on, each week students read a short story and performed oral reading in groups of about six assigned by the instructor.

In accordance with the procedure suggested in the literature (Casey & Chamberlain, 2006; Hoffman, 1987; Martinez et al., 1999), each RT session began with the instructor talking about the plot and modeling oral interpretation of the story. The instructor would then lead the students to think about how each character felt and how to interpret the character’s feelings with their reading. Afterward, the students would practice oral reading in their own groups. Following group practice was performance and awarding. Group performance was evaluated by their peers with a rating scale adapted from Tsou’s (2006) RT Assessment Rating Scale. The three groups with the highest scores would receive prizes of snacks in the beginning of the next RT session.

In each RT session, in addition to monitoring and helping the students, the instructor would observe the students, take notes, and videotape the students. Also, the instructor invited eight students, (four low achievers, two high achievers, and two with average proficiency) to interview to gain an understanding of their perception of RT activities (see Table 1 for information about the interviewees). The participants’ proficiency levels were based on their English course grades in the previous semester. Those in the top 25% were considered as high achievers, the bottom 25% as low achievers, and the rest as average. In addition to their English course grades, the researchers chose these eight students because they were among those who often shared their ideas and thoughts with the instructor after class and were thus more comfortable with talking to the instructor. Each selected student was interviewed four times throughout the semester. These students were invited to stay after RT activities to talk with the instructor for 15-20 minutes. They were invited to talk mainly about the process of group practice, perception of RT activities, and concerns or suggestions regarding RT. The instructor also exchanged opinions and feelings with the selected participants on related topics as they emerged during the conversations. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Recurrent themes from the interview responses and instructor’s notes were then presented and discussed in the following section.
Table 1  Background Information of the Eight Selected Interviewees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Jerry</th>
<th>Tina</th>
<th>Henry</th>
<th>Betty</th>
<th>Sherry</th>
<th>Larry</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Sandy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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M = male, F = female, H = high achievers, L = low achievers, A = average achievers.

Results and Discussion

1. Student Interaction

Some issues regarding RT implementation and student interaction were observed during the 15 weeks of RT activities. The following excerpts of instructor’s notes and student interview responses are English translations of the original responses.

1.1 It took some time to ease the students into RT

Despite the many potentials of RT reported in the literature, the current study found, unexpectedly, some initial resistance to RT from the participants, probably because they had been so used to grammar-based instruction and not having to speak out in class. During the first RT session, some students complained that they were very nervous when they were up on the stage and were worried that they mispronounced words. Two students even refused to participate in group practice. These two students, however, later became active members in group practice and showed a much more positive attitude toward learning English after a few weeks (Details on the behavioral change of these two students are presented later as special cases). Despite the initial resistance, the class gradually developed familiarity with the activity after a few RT sessions and learned to enjoy RT. The following excerpts from the instructor’s notes illustrate the process.

Four students with poor proficiency were left out in the grouping process. Nobody wanted to include them in the group, so I asked them to form a group themselves. They, however, did not practice. The four of them either did something else or slept. (February 14, 2008)

Some students complained that RT was not so good because there were some words that they didn’t know how to pronounce. (February 21, 2008)

Henry waited for me in the hall way before the class began and asked me what they were going to do that day. When I told him that they’d do RT again, Henry happily exclaimed...
“Hurray! We’re going to perform again. RT is my favorite!” and ran into the classroom to tell the other students. (March 27, 2008)

1.2 The students gradually learned to work together as a team and to help each other

Since students in the class worked and were assessed as groups, students needed to help each other in order to ensure better group performance. During group practice, students with higher proficiency were observed to help those with lower proficiency to pronounce the words and show appropriate emotions, and some students encouraged and praised others during performance. The following excerpts from the instructor’s notes show how students helped each other and worked as a team.

Paul [a low proficiency student] was left out during the grouping process because other students thought his English was too bad and he often fell asleep in class. However, Paul was very brave and read aloud during the performance. Paul pronounced a few words incorrectly, and one girl in the audience said to him “It’s OK to mispronounce words.” (February 14, 2008)

One team member encouraged Paul and said “Everyone practiced hard, so there is no need to feel intimidated by going on stage. Just do your best and speak up so others can hear you.” (March 14, 2008)

This time the students worked pretty well together. Those with better proficiency helped those with difficulties. The weaker students seemed less intimidated by going on stage, though their performance on stage was usually not as good as off stage. They seemed to enjoy practicing and feel better about themselves. (April 24, 2008)

Some students also reported good teamwork among their groups in their interview responses.

I once was in a group with Lee…. He keeps a lot of stray cats at home, so he always smells bad, plus his grades are poor in every subject, so nobody wished to be in a group with him…. I taught him how to read the lines, and he did manage to read them on stage. We don’t laugh at others in our group. (Tina, May 15, 2008)

Our group members worked pleasantly together. Everybody cooperated and worked hard. It was good practice. (Jerry, March 14, 2008)
1.3 Appropriate and timely instructor intervention in grouping was needed to promote better interaction and develop a closer tie among students

The instructor allowed students to form their own groups in the first week, but some students (especially low-proficiency ones) were left out, so the instructor assigned students into groups from the second week on. The instructor intended for students to work with different classmates each time so they could venture out of their social circles and take turns in assuming the leading role within the group. Although students with higher proficiency expressed their preference in finding their own group members and those with poor proficiency preferred to be assigned by the instructor, the instructor continued to assign students into groups by using a different grouping strategy each week. The following excerpts illustrate students’ preference in grouping and how instructor intervention helped smooth problems in grouping. More evidence can be found in a later section on the two special cases.

Students with better proficiency tried to help those with difficulties, although they preferred finding their own group members. Those with low proficiency, on the other hand, preferred to be assigned by the instructor because they were worried that no one would take them. (March 13, 2008)

Some boys were reluctant to take May [a low proficiency and unpopular student] in their group. I persuaded them into accepting May. May practiced hard and came to ask me several times about how to read her lines. (February 21, 2008)

1.4 Students developed their own strategies for assigning roles within groups

Although the instructor assigned the students into groups, the task of assigning roles among the group was left to the students. As time went by, students developed their own strategy for assigning roles, as seen in the notes and interview responses below. Through assigning roles, students learned the important social skill about how to reach an agreement to achieve the best interest for the whole group, which constitutes an important teamwork skill that can be useful throughout their lives.

Several students said “I want to play the leading role.” Some students seemed uninterested initially. They were later assigned roles by others and practiced with their groups. (February 21, 2008)

Students used “rock, scissors, paper” to decide who would play which role. (March 3, 2008)
Sandy suggested that the weaker students pick the roles first. Other members agreed and the weak students picked shorter and simpler lines. (March 14, 2008)

When we assigned roles, those with better English would first pick the longer and more difficult lines and leave simpler ones to those whose English is not so good. We don’t argue or laugh at others. (Tina, May 15, 2008)

2. Students’ Perception of RT

2.1 Benefits of RT

2.1.1 RT improves oral reading fluency

As discussed in previous literature, improvement in oral reading fluency was frequently mentioned by the students as one of the major benefits of RT (Keehn, 2003; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Moran, 2006). While speaking and oral reading tends to receive insufficient emphasis in traditional junior high school English classes, RT provides lots of opportunities and authentic needs for students to speak English with appropriate intonation and emotions. As a result, improved fluency and self-confidence was the most apparent benefit of RT as reported by the students in the interviews. In addition, some students also reported improvement in their speaking and reading abilities.

RT improved my English speaking ability. I can speak more fluently now…. I like English better now. I like reading out loud. My English is more fluent. (Henry, May 25, 2008)

We are more confident about speaking out and find learning English more interesting. [RT] gave us opportunities to practice oral skills so we could speak better. (Henry, March 14, 2008)

RT helped me read those sentences more fluently. It also improved my reading ability. (Sherry, May 15, 2008)

I can read with better fluency. It helped me improve my speaking ability. (Sandy, March 14, 2008)

2.1.2 RT benefits vocabulary learning.

Another reported benefit of RT that is closely related to improvement of reading fluency is on vocabulary learning. Some students reported that RT practice helped them learn more words, pronounce better, and recognize words more quickly, which also echoes findings of previous studies (Chen 2006; Hung, 2004; Huang, 2007; Yang, 2006).
I learned more words, and my pronunciation became better. (Jerry, May 25, 2008)

The greatest benefit is that I learned new words. I learned a lot of words that I didn’t know before. (David, May 25, 2008)

[RT] also made me recognize the words more quickly when I encountered them. (Sandy, March 14, 2008)

### 2.1.3 RT increases motivation and reduces anxiety.

Aside from the benefits in language learning, students also reported beneficial effects of RT in the affective domain, such as enhanced confidence and motivation, and reduced fear of English.

I think it made me braver. I could speak English more bravely and clearly. (Tina, March 14, 2008)

It helped us gain the courage to speak out, and it made practicing English more fun. (Henry, March 14, 2008)

We got used to going on stage and speaking English out loud. It helped us conquer stage fright. (Betty, March 14, 2008)

I like reading English more. It’s very rare for me to have positive feelings about English. When the scripts are not too easy or too hard, [RT] made learning English easier, and I felt more motivated. (Tina, May 25, 2008)

As reported in the literature, the peer cooperation and performance in RT seem to make learning more dynamic and enjoyable, and therefore increases students’ motivation in English reading and learning (Fink, 2006; Rizopoulos, 2004).

### 2.1.4 RT fosters peer cooperation and development of social skills

The sense of achievement comes not just from performing on stage, but also from helping others and striving to accomplish group work with good results.

I learned to like English more…, and I learned how to work with other classmates. I learned the value of teamwork. (Henry, May 25, 2008)

RT helped the classmates cooperate more with each other. (Jerry, May 25, 2008)

Some students mentioned that they developed a sense of achievement from being assigned
(or choosing) the more difficult lines because they felt proud to help the group achieve better final result.

I felt honored when I read the difficult lines. I felt my English was good because I could do it, and I felt proud that I contributed to the group performance. I also liked helping others with their lines. (Tina, May 15, 2008)

From the responses above, it seems that RT encouraged cooperation and group effort, and helped develop a closer relationship among students.

2.2 Concerns

Despite the mostly positive responses about RT, the students reported some concerns or perceived disadvantages of RT.

2.2.1 The group practice created too much noise

Two students talked about the high noise level when the students were practicing within groups.

The disadvantage is that it was very noisy when we did group practicing, way too noisy. (Sherry, March 14, 2008)

Although we were able to finish the task smoothly, the entire process was very noisy and chaotic. (David, March 14, 2008)

These views were both expressed in earlier interview sessions, and the issue of noise did not come up again in later interviews with these two or other students. It seems that the students needed some time to get accustomed to the noise and moving around during RT practice, since it is not conventional to have activities that require students to speak out loud at the same time or move around in junior high school English classes. As the students grew accustomed to the noise level, they seemed more able to focus on the learning process and appreciate the benefits of such activities.

2.2.2 Low-proficiency learners might stall group progress.

Another concern regarded working with students with poor proficiency. Some students reported that working with those students took a long time and held the entire group back.

Some classmates didn’t know how to read. It was difficult to read with them. They couldn’t pronounce the words. It was too tiring [to work with them]. (Larry, March 14, 2008)

It was hard for those who didn’t know how to read. It took a lot of time for them to practice,
and some of them read with a very low volume. It was hard for us to hear them. (Jerry, March 14, 2008)

As with the first concern, this problem was reported only in earlier interview sessions and never came up in later interviews. This may be because as the students had more opportunities to work together, they gradually figured out a way to work with students of different proficiency levels and came to appreciate the value of teamwork and peer teaching, as evidenced in their responses about the benefits of RT.

2.2.3 Students were not given sufficient time and instruction to fully learn the meanings of new words, and that might widen the gap between high and low-proficiency students

The last concern was about vocabulary learning. Conflicting views were expressed by the students about RT’s potential in vocabulary learning. Two of the students interviewed mentioned that they were not allowed enough time to fully learn the new words in the scripts and not given a clear definition by the instructor about each new word before the group performance, and that in turn might widen the gap between the proficient students and the less proficient ones.

I was unable to learn the new words in the process. Those with better proficiency read more, and their English became better. On the contrary, those with poor English read less and improved less. (David, March 14, 2008)

I liked the activity, but I still felt confused about the script…. After the practice and performance, I still couldn’t fully understand the words that I did not know, and that really bothers me a lot. (David, May 25, 2008)

I was unable to quickly absorb the words I didn’t know. Plus I was often nervous when I was on stage, and that made me forget how to pronounce the new words. (Sandy, March 21, 2008)

Although RT is usually perceived to be beneficial to both high and low-proficiency students (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004) through peer cooperation, some researchers emphasized the beneficial effect on challenged students because RT provides poorer readers fluency support from the more capable readers (Black and Stave, 2007; Flynn, 2004; Guthrie and Wigfield, 1997; Martinez et al., 1999). Contrary to what these researchers had proposed, two students in the present study worried that since the high-proficiency students usually assumed the leading role during practice and were given more lines, they would improve more than the low-proficiency students because the
less-proficient ones were often given easier lines and therefore had less opportunity to practice. The students’ concern might seem all reasonable, for they were accustomed to being given clear definitions of vocabulary and grammar rules in class. However, as the low-proficiency students begin to take an active attitude toward the activity, and with support from peers, they are taking an extremely valuable first step into the long journey of English learning and are likely to make further efforts in other learning activities as well. Such a change in attitude and behavior might lead to long-term effects that the students were unable to perceive during the short period of 15 weeks.

3. Two Special Cases: Sherry and Lee

The two special cases below highlight RT’s potential in helping low-proficiency and poorly-motivated students by showing their experiences with RT and their behavior change during the 15-week RT process.

3.1 Background Information

The two students, Sherry and Lee, were both from dysfunctional families. Sherry’s father worked in Mainland China and was therefore away most of the time. Her parents’ marriage was failing, and her mother was emotionally unstable. Sherry had a bad relationship with her mother and did not have many friends at school because other students considered her ill-tempered and unfriendly. Sherry gave up on English a long time ago. She, however, enjoyed Chinese literature and frequently read Chinese novels during English classes. She had been reading Chinese classical writings since childhood and could write poems in Chinese. She checked out the highest number of books on campus the year before the study.

Lee, on the other hand, came from a low-income family. His father was unemployed. He was considered emotionally disturbed by many teachers at school and needed much attention, although he generally would not make trouble or disturb others in class. Probably due to poor sanitary conditions at home, a strange smell usually exuded from him. Like Sherry, Lee was far from popular among the students. He usually slept through the class and was excluded in all group activities.

3.2 Experiences with RT

Sherry and Lee initially detached themselves from the RT activities, most probably due to low motivation in learning English and poor relationship with peers.
Sherry read a Chinese novel and said she didn’t want to practice. She did not participate at all in the activity. (February 14, 2008)

Lee did not participate at all. No one wanted to include him in the group. He threw away the script. Everyone in the class acted like he did not exist at all. (February 14, 2008)

In the following few weeks, their resistance seemed softened, partly due to the instructor’s effort in guiding them and engaging them in the activity. They began to show a slight interest in the activities.

Sherry lost her temper on stage and yelled “I don’t know how to read any of this.” I came on stage and read through her part with her. (February 21, 2008)

Sherry began to show a little interest in RT practice. She was willing to go on stage and read her lines, but she just fiddled with something, teased and yelled at others during group practice time. (March 7, 2008)

Sherry participated in group practice but loudly protested during performance time that she was always in the first group that went on stage. I offered to give extra points to the first group that went on stage, so Sherry’s group began the performance gladly. (March 14, 2008)

Sherry was reading her Chinese novel at first, but after the grouping she went to her group and practiced. During performance, she read with a very loud and expressive voice, which had an excellent dramatic effect, but she covered her face with the script the whole time. (April 17, 2008)

I assigned students into groups instead of asking them to find their own partners. The group that Lee was assigned to was mocked by other groups as “unlucky”. Two students complained to me that they were so unlucky to have Lee in their group. Lee did not go on stage, but he did participate to some extent by sitting in front of the class to watch the performance for a while. (February 21, 2008)

I asked Lee’s group to give him a very short line (only one word). His group members agreed, so he went on stage and read the word. (March 7, 2008)

I asked Lee’s group to give him a very simple line in the past two weeks so he could stay and practice with the group. He sometimes ran off from group practice, but he also came to
ask me how to read his part. This week his group was one of the best groups. Since his student number is the lowest in the group, he was supposed to go on stage to receive the award, but he refused to. (March 21, 2008)

After a few weeks, more consistent and active participation could be seen from Sherry. Her increasing involvement was also shown in that she not only completed her own reading reflection notes (the instructor required them to write reflection notes on an assigned outside reading as a weekly assignment for their regular English classes), but also demanded that others did the same, which was a sharp contrast with her passive attitude in the past. As for Lee, his change was mainly manifested in his willingness to make efforts in reading simple lines in RT performances and approaching the instructor for help. An even more valuable effect on Lee was that, through working with other students and acting as a team member in the weekly practice, his relationship with other classmates seemed to have improved. He was no longer abandoned by the whole class, and that in turn encouraged him to engage more actively in RT and other English learning activities in class.

Sherry read her Chinese novel in the beginning of the class. Then she participated in group practice and read her lines with another member in the group. I thought she didn’t write the reading reflection notes this week, but she did. She also helped me arrange the notes collected from the classmates according to student numbers and asked those students who didn’t write the reflection notes to do so. (May 10, 2008)

Sherry seemed to participate merrily in group practice and performance. (May 24, 2008)

Lee had an operation two weeks ago. Some students visited him in the hospital. This week he actively participated in group practice. He underlined his part, asked me whether he read the lines correctly, and was eager to share his experience of the operation with me and some other students. (June 5, 2008)

Lee was given one line in the past few weeks and went on stage to read his line. He was willing to write the reading reflection notes now. If he does not know how to write something, he’d come to ask me or express himself with pictures. This week on his reflection notes he made a lot of effort in drawing a bird cage, which is something he never did in the past. He used to just sleep through the class. (June 26, 2008)

From the descriptions above, it is clear that RT transformed the mostly solitary learning process into a more interactive and cooperative one which helped even the low-proficiency and
poorly-motivated students by engaging them in the learning process, improving their relationship with peers, and placing them in a better position to benefit from the learning activities.

Conclusion

1. Summary of Findings

The present study examines junior high school students’ interaction and perception of Readers Theater by looking at students’ interview responses and instructor’s observation and reflection notes. The main purpose was to look closely into the implementation process of RT in a junior high school classroom to provide reference for future use of RT in similar instructional contexts. Regarding RT implementation, the study found that students need to be eased into the procedure because RT requires repeated oral reading, group practice, and performance, which is drastically different from regular classroom instruction in high school. The instructor’s guidance and tactful intervention is therefore essential for successful implementation of RT. The study also found that RT did foster cooperation among the students and improve their relationships with each other. Over time, students developed their own strategies in dealing with issues like assigning roles and started to help each other to ensure better group performance.

As to students’ perception of RT, the students reported that RT benefited them on both linguistic and affective levels. On the linguistic level, they perceived RT to help them with vocabulary learning and increasing fluency of oral reading. On the affective level, the students considered RT effective in enhancing motivation to learn English because it’s a fun activity. Moreover, they also reported gaining a sense of achievement through performing and, more importantly, helping and receiving help from peers. Some students also reported becoming more confident after RT performances. Such findings were mainly consistent with the findings of previous studies that RT motivates students, improves reading fluency, and fosters cooperative learning (Black & Stave, 2007; Chen, 2006; Huang, 2007; Martinez et al., 1999; Uthman, 2002). Some students, on the other hand, voiced concerns about the noise level during group practice and the gap between high and low-proficiency learners.

2. Implications

Based on the findings, some implications can be drawn about the implementation process to ensure a more enjoyable and rewarding RT experience.
First, more efforts may be directed to vocabulary learning during the process of RT. According to students’ interview responses, some students were concerned about learning the exact meanings of new words in the script. Such concern may be directly related to Taiwanese junior high school students’ habit of learning the exact meaning of every new word before reading any new materials. To address students’ concern and enhance the value of RT in English learning, instructors may consider focusing on word meaning before the oral reading practice, which may be conducted in a variety of ways from teacher explaining the word meaning to guiding students to infer word meaning from context. If students are given more time to work on word meanings, their concern about not fully learning the new words may be relieved, which in turn might help them appreciate the value of RT and enjoy the process more.

Second, careful attention needs to be paid to the grouping process. In the present study, the instructor first allowed the students to form their own groups in order to attain better interaction among group members. She, however, took over the grouping process one week later by using a different strategy to assign students into groups each week because some students were clearly disliked by others and were excluded from the activity completely. In addition to helping the least favored students become part of the learning activity, assigning students into different groups also ensures that students work with different partners each week, which might improve class interaction and build a better cooperation mode among some groups.

Finally, the instructor plays a crucial role in the success of RT implementation. During the semester, the instructor played the key role of a facilitator. She first solved the problem of some students being excluded by assigning students into groups and encouraging group members to give some simple lines to the less-proficient students (as in the case of Lee). She also dealt with students’ emotional reactions during the process (e.g., offering to read together with Sherry on stage when she lost control). For RT practice to run smoothly, the instructor needs to be highly responsive to students’ difficulties on not only linguistic but also affective levels. Only when students feel secure enough and well taken care of will they take initiative and engage themselves actively in the learning process.

Another issue worth mentioning is that the instructor refrained from forcing students into practice. As mentioned earlier, it took Sherry and Lee a few weeks to show interest and later become an active member in RT practice. The instructor, while trying to involve them in practice and performance, allowed them some freedom to choose when and how much they wished to join the activity. As seen in the instructor’s notes, Sherry often spent the beginning few minutes of the class reading Chinese novels and only joined group practice later, and Lee sometimes did not stay in his group during practice during the first few weeks. If the instructor had forced them
into practicing from the first week, anxiety or other negative feelings might have arisen, and one may reasonably assume that their active participation and increased interest in learning English (as evidenced by behaviors such as writing reflection notes, volunteering to help collect other students’ notes, and frequently coming to the instructor for help) towards the end of the semester might not have emerged. All in all, the present study demonstrates that RT has the potential of becoming a ticket to not only reading fluency but also stronger motivation and better social skills, as long as it is carried out with proper design and care.
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Readers Theater as a Ticket to More than Reading Fluency


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讀者劇場在增進朗讀流暢度之外的功效：學生互動和觀感

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摘 要

本研究探討臺灣中學生在施行讀者劇場過程中的互動和對讀者劇場的觀感。研究對象為北部一所國中的 35 名七年級學生，教師利用每週一節課的時間進行讀者劇場共 15 週。資料蒐集包含其中八位學生各四次的訪談和教師的觀察紀錄及反思日誌。結果顯示透過讀者劇場，學生間的互動得到改善，對於英語學習有較高的動機，且在發音上有進步。文章並呈現兩個特殊個案在過程中的變化以說明讀者劇場對於低成就、低動機學生的影響。最後也提出對於日後施行讀者劇場的具體建議。

關鍵字：讀者劇場、學習動機、互動