

An Introduction to Readers Theatre

Phee Nugent

The Centre for the Study of English Language Teaching

JOURNAL Volume 9

FUKUOKA JO GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

An Introduction to Readers Theatre

Phee Nugent

Abstract

It is common in Japanese university English classrooms to meet students across the spectrum of English levels who lack the confidence and ability to speak fluently. Additionally, many of them have great difficulty in understanding spoken English. Students aren't introduced to the rules and conventions of English pronunciation in a way that enables them to assimilate and use this knowledge, and this precludes many learners from speaking smoothly or understanding naturally spoken English.

Readers Theatre is a performance-based group activity in which participants read aloud from a script. In English as a foreign language education Readers Theatre may be an effective approach to enable students to achieve greater language fluency and due to its structured nature, build their confidence to speak English.

What follows is an introduction to how Readers Theatre can be implemented in the Japanese university classroom with the aim of helping students to develop better English communication skills in relation to pronunciation, fluency, listening skills and confidence.

Key words: Readers Theatre, pronunciation practice, prosody, confidence building, fluency, listening skills

Introduction

University English teachers spend considerable time and energy finding methods and activities to develop their students' English speaking competence. These activities may seek to address a holistic approach to learning or may be an attempt to target specific deficiencies in their learners' abilities. Despite a minimum of 6 years of English education by the time they reach university, Japanese students often emerge from secondary education with problems inherent to the learning methods found there. Consequently, in university English classes it's common to find students ill-equipped to use English in a communicative way, especially in

conversation. Two common shortcomings with university students are the inability to speak fluently and the lack of confidence to speak at all. And, like every aspect of learning, the lack of one capability feeds into the other. Such deficits are the result of an education system that prioritizes passing written examinations rather than building language use. As the Japanese government aims to equip citizens with the ability to function in a global society many schools are changing their approach, but old habits die hard and change comes slowly. The result is that university English teachers in Japan often find that their students have difficulty using and understanding spoken English, although they may be capable of reading and writing.

It seems obvious to say that students cannot be expected to achieve mastery in something they do not regularly practice yet sadly, this is often what happens. The lack of opportunity to practice using English results in a lack of confidence, making students feel self-conscious and inadequate. Under such stressful conditions they inevitably fall back on the lowest common denominator of their foreign language communication skills. These may reflect the very first contact with English they had in junior high school, and include rudimentary vocabulary and katakana pronunciation. This non-standard pronunciation and a lack of confidence to speak can be seen across the range of language abilities, which may come as a surprise to many teachers. We expect students with high English test scores to be able to speak confidently and have pronunciation approximating standard English. Problems with English use in high ability learners may reflect psychological factors as well as those of linguistic awareness. It may be that the student doesn't want to stand out in front of their peers, or perhaps they subconsciously seek to retain a self-image they are familiar with. But it could also be due to their inexperience of using the correct forms of English as well as an absence of practice. Associated with a lack of correct pronunciation output is that students have trouble decoding natural English pronunciation when they hear it and it has been suggested that the prosodic differences between English and Japanese may account for this: "*Japanese learners often lack a natural understanding of suprasegmental phonology, impeding comprehension, which minimizes learning opportunities and seriously disadvantages learning. Explicit teaching is needed.*" (Graham-Marr, 2018). The fact that Japanese is a mora timed language and English is a stress timed language further disadvantages Japanese students in being able to understand the ebbs and

flows of English pronunciation without explicit instruction. The way that English words stretch, contract and join together causes much difficulty when individual word-sounds cannot be recognized. Learning the pronunciation of single words and their accents and not elements such as weak sounds across the level of the clause, does not reflect how English is used by native speakers. The degree that 'stress and intonation' is taught in high schools seems to exclude many of the prosodic elements of English that are vital for communication. Suprasegmental factors such as pitch, length of sounds, loudness and voice quality act as linguistic functions and are as important to recognize as they are to use. They may indicate the speaker's emotional state, their opinions and attitudes and even the status of the speakers relative to each other. Prosodic elements are also clues that reveal sentence structure and often their function, for example whether it's a question or a statement. Furthermore, they signal important features that many second language speakers struggle with such as turn-taking and understanding the subtext of a conversation.

When students have areas of underdeveloped skills, it is the teachers' responsibility to create learning opportunities to address those weak points. Teachers must offer success-based activities and experiences that build students' confidence to speak as well as being enjoyable enough to motivate them. They must be not only educational, but gradable and offer clear signs of progression and success. To find such an activity is a considerable undertaking for any teacher. Difficulty lies partly in the fact that the improvement of language skills depends upon the students' willingness to practice and in compulsory English classes this motivation is often absent. Repeated practice is seen as boring and pointless when students cannot see an immediate purpose or result of their hard work. Teachers find themselves resorting to modes of study that attempt to incorporate what students do in their free time just to get them to practice, for example by using their cell phones or by watching YouTube videos. Although these modern avenues for learning have much to offer, and indeed are important methods of integrating new technology into the classroom, they have their own drawbacks inherent to their approach. One of these is having students develop their skills in isolation from actual live human contact. While this may be an inevitable sign of our modern times, it seems inauthentic considering the social nature of communication. The challenge is to create interactive activities that engage students' interests, are educationally sound and encourage the practice necessary for real

progress in improving their skills. Additionally, learners need opportunities to use a second language in a range of situations and contexts: It's one thing to share a textbook based conversation, or even to be able to talk about their personal preferences, but quite another to transfer these skills into situations removed from the language learning classroom. Readers Theatre is one method of giving students learning opportunities that fulfil all of these conditions and is flexible enough to implement with students of any age or language ability.

What is Readers Theatre?

Readers Theatre is the dramatic reading of a text by 'actors' without the use of props, costumes or any other kind of stage sets. The origins of Readers Theatre hark back to the poetry recitals of ancient Greece and the public readings and dramatic performances of prose popular in the 1800's. The unique element about Readers Theatre is, as the name suggests, that the participants are *reading* their lines, that is, they do not have to *learn* their lines. At first, Readers Theatre may seem lifeless in its simplicity and unlikely to engage students' attention or address their needs. But with a structured approach it's not difficult to imagine how it can foster many of the skills necessary for second language development, particularly in addressing deficits such as poor pronunciation and low levels of confidence. Furthermore, the group nature of the activity is in itself motivational and students are encouraged and supported by the interactions with their peers. Linguistically, the strength of the approach lies in the fact that the participants do not act out the narrative as in traditional theatre, but rather dramatize the text through their voices alone. In order to do this, learners must have a grasp of the elements of English prosody vital for conveying both explicit and implicit meaning. They may be called upon to use features of speech that they have never encountered before as they strive to convey the context and the drama of a story using only their voices.

Readers Theatre in the EFL classroom

Readers Theatre is highly adaptable, flexible and easy to integrate into the classroom. There are only three basic stages to the activity: first, selecting the text; second, carrying out a 'practice - review - practice' cycle

and third, performing. The depth of approach and how much time is spent on each of the stages depend upon the level of the students and the teacher's aims and objectives. Scaffolding is built in to the activities as the participants are not required to learn the text and can consult their notes while speaking. Repetition is also a key component of Readers Theatre as students are required to experiment repeatedly with the dynamic interactions of their voices. And as Readers Theatre is a group activity it can be used with any size class of two or more students. Additionally, no special texts or equipment are necessary as self-generated or free online scripts can be used and typically, the performances don't use any kind of sets, costumes or special lighting.

Stage One: Introducing the project and selecting the text

A thorough introduction to the concepts and purposes of Readers Theatre will ensure that students understand the teacher's aims and objectives for the project. Students' first impressions may be that the task is simple and will require next to nothing from them beside reading aloud. This indicates that they have never considered the different delivery features of speech and how meanings can be changed through them. Students can be shown examples of sentences demonstrating how different stress patterns alone can change the meaning: The seven word sentence, "*I didn't say he stole the money*" can have seven different meanings depending upon which of the words is stressed. Students can practice matching the different inflections with their implicit meanings. For example, which stress pattern shows that although *I* didn't say so, someone else did, "***I*** *didn't say he stole the money*"; or shows he may have done something else with the money, "*I didn't say he* ***stole*** *the money*"; or even that it wasn't the money he stole, "*I didn't say he stole the* ***money***". A short movie clip showing a Readers Theatre performance may also be useful when introducing the project. There are many such clips online showing performances ranging from elementary school students to professional Readers Theatre companies.

The first stage of the project is to have students practice with a prescribed text. The text should be in script form clearly showing the different characters. Each student is assigned a role and opportunities are given for them to exchange texts so that they can try out all of the parts. Groups then record their initial attempts of reading the script. A recording

made early on in the project will enable learners to see the greatest improvement in their skills and abilities to perform later on. After the prescribed text has been exploited fully, the groups of students write or adapt their own scripts and repeat the process. Scripts should be selected that appeal to the learners' interests as much as possible, especially in the initial stages. When they are more familiar with the process, they can be offered material that includes contexts and situations from the target language culture. For example, by drawing on characters from Western literature or movies that show them in typical native scenarios. In this way, cultural understanding is developed as well as language skills. There is a wide range of downloadable Readers Theatre resources available at no cost online.

Stage Two: Practice - Review - Practice

The practice - review - practice cycle enables learners to explore and become familiar with the various aspects of the text. Although students often resist repeated practice, every teacher knows the value of repetition cannot be overstated and according to educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky, repeated experiences are how students internalize processes (Cole et al. 1978). In Readers Theatre different prosodic features are focused on with each review of the script and so students are given a new experience of repeating a task. The teacher may focus on pausing and intonation in one class, expressive repetition in another, contrasting intonations, the use of volume and pitch and may even include haptic elements such as facial expressions and gestures. Students mark up their texts showing these different features, making it easy to integrate them into their speech as they read. And, as each new element is introduced, readers re-read the script incorporating the new knowledge into their performance. The teacher's role is to guide students through the various aspects of the script, highlighting the different features and the meanings they carry. How much detail is included depends upon the teacher's learning objectives and can range from simply explaining what the features are, to giving general rules and practices, for example showing how pauses are usually found at the end of prepositional phrases. Teachers also model the correct forms and provide guidance and feedback as learners progress. It's important that groups record themselves at various intervals throughout the project using either sound or video equipment.

This enables them to review what they have learned, evaluate the performances and see their own progress. A grading rubric can be used so that students can grade each other's performances as well as their own. Items to be evaluated can include whether the readers' voices show appropriate volume, pitch and the expressive qualities of emotion. Do they make effective use of pauses and changes in tonality and is the story imaginatively and dynamically portrayed? Supporting activities can be included that focus on specific skills, for example expressing emotion, showing opinions such as agreement or disagreement or varying the voice to demonstrate the degree of certitude about something. Such features are key elements of communication and show important subtexts of a conversation or exchange.

Stage Three: Performance

After groups are given input of the key prosodic elements and opportunities to practice and assimilate this knowledge, they are called on to perform. Although some drama based classroom activities are 'process-based' meaning that they focus on the process of the activity rather than a final product (McGovern, 2017), Readers Theatre is 'product-based' that is, performing the script is an integral part of the project. Through performing, students become more accustomed to speaking aloud to an audience using their full range of expressive voice qualities. Additionally, using English 'in character' enables students to acquire the language in a situation that closely resembles a realistic communicative setting: When language is functional and used in its appropriate context it becomes much easier to master (Ng, 2010).

The staging of Readers Theatre is often classified into three types; non-theatrical, semi-theatrical and theatrical, depending on how many props, special items or acting is employed. The teacher can choose whether to have students speaking from their seats or from in front of the class and the level of theatrical approach. Performances may be as short as two minutes or longer than ten and in the EFL context, are most often done from the front of the class. There are many ways to adapt the scripts; choral reading can be used for dramatic effect, narrators can be included and they can even call for audience participation. The flexibility of Readers Theatre is perhaps one of the most valuable and enjoyable aspects of its approach.

How Readers Theatre benefits students

The strength of Readers Theatre is that it exposes students to the correct forms of naturally spoken English and gives them opportunities and incentives to practice using them. Although the research on Readers Theatre in an EFL context is not extensive, the studies published assert that learners benefit in key areas of their language development. In a study in a Norwegian EFL classroom, Drew and Pedersen (2010), measured gains in pronunciation, word recognition and fluency as well as in students' confidence and motivation to read aloud. Liu (2000), found that Readers Theatre helped to improve Asian EFL university students' reading, linguistic competence, cultural awareness and confidence in communicating in English. And Lengeling et al (1996), reported students achieving a deeper understanding and appreciation of the language as they drew on their listening, speaking and reading skills when doing Readers Theatre. Ng (2010), discusses how the benefits discerned in implementing drama into the foreign language classroom, such as an improvement of oral communication skills, knowledge and comprehension, are common to those brought by Readers Theatre. In a 2010 study in a Japanese university classroom, Ng surveyed students' attitudes towards the Readers Theatre activities as well as if they thought it had improved their speaking skills. The results were positive and showed that students not only enjoyed doing Readers Theatre but that after watching their classmates perform, they felt newly motivated to improve their spoken English. His students reported feeling immediate motivation to master their parts, as the success of the performance relied upon all members of the cast working collaboratively. Lekwilai (2014), found that Readers Theatre benefitted his university students in Thailand in terms of the key components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension, competencies that surely carry over to their ability to speak. Readers Theatre is often lauded as providing natural incentives for students to reread a text multiple times, as this ordinarily tedious task is transformed with a focus on different aspects of the script with each reading. And Lengeling et al (1996), note that not only does Readers Theatre integrate the four skills of English, but it is easy to adapt to include cultural, social, historic or contemporary knowledge too.

Conclusions

Many Japanese students never develop an awareness of natural English pronunciation sounds until they are explicitly taught. And unless they sign up for a pronunciation class, they are rarely introduced to the aspects of English prosody that carry important meaning. Features of speech that consider the pitch, rhythm, loudness and quality of voice are seldom considered, much less practiced. Additionally, understanding how English words stretch, contract, change in tempo and join together can only be grasped fully with clear instruction and focused practice.

Group storytelling is and always has been an essential part of human society whether it takes place around a fire, in a theatre or classroom or as dramatized offerings on weekly TV. Readers Theatre is a social activity that can be adapted for the language learning classroom and used to help learners develop their internal and external reader's voice (Taylor de Caballero, 2010). As students explore the more creative and expressive uses of English, their abilities to both decode and use the language grow. They learn more about how the forms and structures relate to meaning, as well as developing metalinguistic awareness. The approach inspires practice through meaningful repetition as students must read and reread the text, each time adding new layers of interpretation. Readers and audience alike learn how not only meaning but also mood and subtext is relayed through the rhythms, pauses and intonations of natural English. Readers Theatre also helps students to feel confident in using English as the approach includes built in scaffolding as learners are never required to learn their scripts or put down their notes. Through imaginative choices of texts and study materials, teachers can support their learners' growing knowledge and introduce them to communicative contexts they would ordinarily not meet in the classroom. Thus, Readers Theatre familiarizes learners with a wide range of linguistic experiences, norms and practices as well as equipping them with the skills for real communication.

When we think of fluent speakers, they come to mind expressing themselves easily and effectively with language that shares interpersonal aspects as well as the facts. To learn the cultural and linguistic conventions of such fluency takes practice and experience and Readers Theatre is a way to introduce these elements into the language learning classroom. Considering that this method of bringing literature to life has been around for so long, it is surprising not to see it incorporated more into foreign

language learning.

References

- Almond, M. (2017). The What, Why and How of Drama in Language Teaching. Retrieved from: <https://www.mlaworld.com/blog/the-what-why-and-of-drama-language-teaching/>
- Bora, S. F. (2017). Beyond the Mere Word: Exploring the Language of Drama Through Text and Performance Based Approaches for Developing L2 Oral Skills. Retrieved from: <http://repository.essex.ac.uk/21287/1/Final%20PhD%20thesis%20Simona%20Bora.pdf>
- Cole, M. *et al.* (eds.) (1978) *L.S. Vygotsky: Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Cramer, N. Ortlieb, E. & Cheek, E. H. (2007). Multiple Ways of Knowing: A Theoretical Framework for Drama and Literacy in a Contemporary Curriculum. *The Reading Matrix Vol. 7, No. 3, December 2007*. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/2820734/Multiple_ways_of_knowing_A_theoretical_framework_for_drama_and_literacy_in_a_contemporary_curriculum_2007_
- Drew, I & Pedersen, R.R. (2010) Readers Theatre: A different approach to English for struggling readers. *Acta Didactica Norge Vol. 4 Nr. 1 Art. 7* Retrieved from: [file:///Users/owner/Downloads/1051-%23%23default.genres.article%23%23-4836-1-10-20150202%20\(1\).pdf](file:///Users/owner/Downloads/1051-%23%23default.genres.article%23%23-4836-1-10-20150202%20(1).pdf)
- Graham-Marr, A. (2015). Elevating the development of listening skills to foster SLA in an Asian context. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 2(2), 7-13*.
- Graham-Marr, A. (2016). An Asia-centric approach to teaching listening skills explicitly. *NELTA Conference Proceedings 2016, 75-77*.
- Lengeling, M., Malarcher, C. and Mills, L. (1996). The use of Readers Theater in the EFL curriculum. *English Teaching Forum, 34(3): 84-86*.
- Liu, J. (2000). The Power of Readers Theater: from reading to writing. *ELT Journal, Volume 54, Issue 4, October 2000, Pages 354-361, Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/54.4.354*
- Martinez, M. R. (2002). "I never thought I could be a star": A readers theater ticket to fluency. *The Reading Teacher, 52, 97-105*. Retrieved from: http://www-tc.pbs.org/teacherline/courses/rdla150/docs/cl1s3_11neverthought.pdf
- McGovern, K. R. (2017). Conceptualizing Drama in the Second Language Classroom. Retrieved from: <http://publish.ucc.ie/journals/scenario/2017/01/McGovern/03/en>
- Ng, P. (2008) The Impact of Readers Theatre (RT) in the EFL Classroom. *Polyglossia Vol 14, 2008*
- Nugent, P. (2019). A University E.S.S. Speech Contest. *The Center for the Study of English Language Teaching Journal. Volume 7*.
- Lekhwiya, P. (2014) Reader's Theater: An Alternative Tool to Develop Reading Fluency among Thai EFL learners. *PASAA Volume 48 July - December 2014*.

- Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1077897.pdf>
- Pheasant, P. (2015). The Epiphany in Process Drama and Language Learning. *p-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e*, 2 (1-2). Retrieved from: <http://p-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e.org/?p=919>
- Taylor de Caballero, K. (2010) Introduction to Readers Theater for EFL Classrooms Presented by Karen Taylor de Caballero Language Training Consultant Santa Fe, New Mexico USA Retrieved from: https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/readerstheater_taylor.pdf
- Thienkalaya, C. (2020). Improving the English Reading Prosody of L2 Learners Through Readers Theater *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network Journal, Volume 13, Issue 2, July 2020*. Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
- Wastila, J. (2018). An Interview With Alastair Graham-Marr. *The Language Teacher - Issue 42.1; January 2018*. Retrieved from: <https://jalt-publications.org/sites/default/files/pdf-article/42.1lt-int1.pdf>

