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## Using Readers Theatre To Improve Reading Fluency And Comprehension

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### ABSTRACT

*Developing students' reading fluency and comprehension is a major challenge faced in many ESL classrooms. Reading fluency has been identified as a key goal for the reading curriculum which has a reciprocal relationship between fluency and comprehension. Despite the academic importance of reading fluency and comprehension, many language instructors have found it challenging to create suitable reading materials to develop these skills. Thus, the introduction of Readers Theater in the classroom would be lucrative as it involves actual vocalization of speech between interlocutors. Readers Theater is basically a dramatic presentation of a written work where students read directly from scripts to tell a story in a more entertaining form. The presentations can easily be done in a classroom as no memorization, props, costumes or stage is needed. While many studies have been conducted on Readers Theater, it has not been effectively introduced in the Malaysian setting. In this experimental study on two groups of students (N=40), a set of Readers Theatre script and a normal reading text was used respectively in a reading lesson. The results were commendable with marked improvement in not only fluency and comprehension, but also on the level of motivation and interest in learning and reading among students.*

**Keywords: Readers theatre, dramatic expressions, reading fluency, reading comprehension.**

### Introduction

According to Meyer and Felton (p. 284: 1999), fluency can be defined as “the ability to read connected text rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly, and automatically with little conscious attention to the mechanics of reading, such as word decoding”. Most scholars agree that when students are able to read fluently, they are able to use their cognitive abilities to focus on the meanings of the words and phrases. However, students who are slow, pause frequently and strive labouriously to decode the words on the page. This, more often than not, diverts their concentration and results in them losing the actual meaning behind the words. Researchers agree (Bashir & Hook, 2009; Rasinski, 2002; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Young & Rasinski, 2009) that fluency and comprehension are linked. A connection is seen between students who read with good oral expression and good comprehension, and reversely, those who read with little or no oral expression and poor comprehension (Rasinski & Young, 2009).

Techniques such as substitution table drills, poetry recitals and reading aloud of texts have been used in ESL classrooms as a means to enhance reading fluency. Learners may read aloud fairly well in terms of pronunciation of individual words, but fail to comprehend the meaning of what they are reading (Wallace, 1992). Although language instructors may have had some success via these techniques, in most cases students would merely be parroting sounds in an effort to immitate the teacher. Such methods are usually a means to an end as they do not allow or encourage students to spring-board into further reading environments. Besides that, the motivation factor is usually low as these techniques fail to create or kindle any interest as students get bored or do not understand the purpose of repeated reading and therefore do not benefit fully from the strategy. This is where 'Readers Theater'(RT) yields its mettle as it provides an excellent strategy for developing fluency for all types of learners, including struggling readers, because it incorporates emotional expressions and voice modulation into a reading aloud activity. Students are excited and motivated because of this element of fun in the atmosphere as they try to 'throw' their voices to depict the characters they play.

### **Literature Review**

One evidenced-based strategy to help students increase fluency is repeated reading. Several researchers have reported that repeated reading increases students' fluency, word recognition, and self-confidence (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Mercer, et al., 2000; Rasinski & Young, 2009). Thus one form of repeated reading that helps students remain motivated is RT. During a RT performance, students read a script and perform for an audience using appropriate expression but unlike traditional theater, props and stage equipment are not necessary. The technique incorporates creative dramatics and performance into the curriculum. Young and Rasinski (2009) state that children "are more likely to practice or rehearse if they know that they will be performing a reading for an audience" (p. 5). Therefore, readers' theater causes students to strive to achieve the goal of performing for an audience; thus, "provides an authentic rationale for reading the same text repeatedly" (Tyler and Chard, 2000, p. 165). Students can easily determine the purpose for the activity because authentic activities make learning more engaging and active. Additionally, the authenticity of performing for others motivates students to prepare for the performance (Young & Rasinski, 2009, p. 381).

One form of repeated reading that helps students remain motivated is RT. According to Trainin and Andrzejczak (2006), RT has three benefits. The first is motivation, as students enjoy performing and want to do a good job. The second is that RT provides meaningful text



to the students and the third, is that it focuses on prosody, which is the use of expression and tone when reading. RT is different from other performance types in that the participants do not have to memorize their lines or act out the parts they are playing (Corcoran & Davis, 2005 ; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Instead students are asked to use their voices to bring the characters to life and use expression to tell the story (Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Teachers have reported that using reader's theater is one of the most motivating and effective reading strategies used in the classroom (Worthy & Prater, 2002).

## **Methodology**

In this experimental study, two groups, namely, an experimental and a control group were chosen. The purpose was to investigate learners' reading fluency and comprehension after undergoing a lesson using a RT script.

### 1. Participants

The participants (N = 40) were all pre-diploma students taking BEL 011 course. All the participants had at least 11 years of formal ESL exposure. The average grade for their English SPM is C. The age group is between 18 to 23 years old. The control group had 21 participants and the experimental group had 19 participants.

### 2. Instrument

#### 2.1 The script

The script, a folk tale entitled "Belalang's Trip To Paradise" was written to suit the learners' level of English proficiency, in this case, elementary. The 10-page script consists of 10 characters.

#### 2.2 Comprehension questions

There were twenty comprehension questions that were divided as the following:

Vocabulary	8 Multiple Choice Questions
True and False	6 Questions
WH-Questions	6 Open-ended Questions

### 2.3 Interview session

An unstructured interview session of 6 questions was carried out with individual students after the lesson.

### 3. Procedure

There were two groups who went through the same script in two separate lessons. The duration of each lesson was 3 hours. In the first group (i.e. the control group) the lesson was conducted like a normal reading comprehension lesson where the students were asked to read the dialogue and answer the questions accordingly.

In the experimental group, treatment of a play was injected into the lesson. The students had to prepare props and perform the readers' theater on the stage. Before the students performed, they were given the scripts and roles to play. They had some practice before their performance. After they performed the readers' theater, they had to answer the reading comprehension questions. Then they were individually interviewed after the lesson.

## Data Analysis

Experimental Group		Control Group	
Grade	Score (%)	Grade	Score (%)
A	52.6	A	0
B	31.6	B	23.8
C	15.8	C	42.9
D	0	D	33.3
E	0	E	0

Table 1: Comparison of Students' Comprehension Scores

In Table 1, the experimental group generally performed better than the control group, with 52.8% scoring grade A, 31.6% scoring grade B, 15.8% scoring grade C. The control group, on the other hand, had no As, as 23.8% scored B, 42.9% scored C and 33.3% scored D.

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 control - experimental	1.47368	.96427	.22122	1.00892	1.93845	6.662	18	.000

Table 2: Paired Samples Test

In addition, based on the T Test (Table 2), there was a significant difference in the students' performance ( $p < 0.05$ ) which supports the findings in Table 1. The results clearly indicate improvement in students' reading fluency and comprehension. This reveals that this pilot study had yielded positive results in the potential of Readers' Theatre to be incorporated in the English classroom lesson.

### Analysis of Interview

Based on the responses of the participants, overall, they found that the lesson promotes team work, creativity and they can understand the text better as they were able to immerse themselves in the characters that they acted during the script reading session. The atmosphere during the lesson was also less intimidating as opposed to the usual reading activity and less stressful. The participants also applauded the assistance from the lecturer and their peers especially when it comes to the pronunciation part, as the script used in this project made use of local setting, Malaysian characters and culture.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of RT on reading fluency and comprehension levels for pre-diploma students. The results points to a positive relationship between the use of RT in the classroom, and overall improvements in students' oral reading fluency. The fluency achieved in reading will create an awareness of the importance of clear and correct pronunciation of words among students. This will in the long run influence the way they speak or utter words in oral interactions in and outside the classroom. Besides, the fun and enjoyment that RT entails provides avenues for instilling the interest in reading for pleasure as they relate to the stories that actually depict real life events and situations. The idea of creating stories and scripts on local settings and scenarios was to give students a

familiar ground to aid understanding and allow them to get connected as they relate themselves to the characters they play.

Evidently, RT not only benefits struggling readers in the classroom, but all students in the classroom due the richness of elements that they need to dwell in i.e. pronunciation, vocalizing words with expressions, relating to the characters and interacting with their peers in an informal English lesson, . RT allows students to have fun playing characters, becoming better readers, and growing as readers. With the reported benefits, one cannot help but ask, why not use RT?

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