

Feature Article

The Pedagogical Relevance of Readers Theatre in the Japanese EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Readers Theatre (henceforth RT) is a presentational performance based on principles and techniques of oral interpretation and conventional theatre (Adams, 2003). This study seeks to examine whether: (i) RT lowers the affective filters of Japanese EFL learners in the classroom, (ii) Japanese EFL learners have positive experiences with RT in class (iii) RT has any impact on Japanese EFL learners' writing. Students' reactions to specific phases of RT activities are described and analysed: script negotiating, script rehearsal, and script performance. For this study, data was collected from the following sources: the teacher's reflexive journals after the RT lesson, students' comments on their writing journals, a survey on students' reactions towards the RT activity, and the impact of RT on students' writing. The results of the study showed that RT lowers affective filters of Japanese EFL learners in the classroom as students display a positive attitude towards RT as an enjoyable and creative activity.

One of the main concerns in L2 acquisition is how to provide students with “real-life” language experience. Felton, Little, Parsons and Schaffner (1988) believe that compared to the informational talk in a typical lesson, there is a higher incidence of interactional and expressive talk when drama activity is included in the classroom. Needlands (1992) states that if the teacher and students are able to use drama to create roles and situations, there will be a greater variety of different contexts for talk. Maley and Duff (1978) also support the use of drama for language development. They suggest that involving students in the negotiation

and construction of drama allows students to link the language they are learning with the world around them. In this study, Readers Theatre, (a simple drama activity), is used to examine its pedagogical implications in the Japanese EFL classroom.

Readers Theatre: Review of the Literature

Readers Theatre (henceforth RT) is a presentational performance based on principles and techniques of oral interpretation and conventional theatre (Adams, 2003). Unlike conventional theatre or drama, RT is an uncomplicated classroom activity in an EFL context because it does not require full costume, stage sets, or memorization of scripts. Students rehearse and perform a play for peers or others through hand-held scripts (Ng, 2013). There is a wealth of literature that documents the effects of RT on emergent readers. According to Adams (2003), through RT, reading is conceived as an enjoyable activity. The mind, body, emotions, and sensory responses are engaged simultaneously when readers read and perform a script. Young and Rasinski (2009) suggest that since the performance of RT involves repetitive reading and assisted reading that focuses on delivering meaning, it is a potential tool for promoting fluency. Keehn (2003) observes that RT enables young readers to improve in speed, accuracy, retelling confidence, fluency, phrasing, expressiveness, and overall reading ability. Jordan and Harrell (2000) recognise RT as an effective drama activity for providing emergent readers with authentic speech practice especially in teaching reading fluency (rate, accuracy, phrasing, pitch, stress, and expressiveness) as well as comprehension. They suggest that “involving students with enjoyable and exciting active reading procedures provide the key to fluency and higher levels of comprehension gain, through a natural process of repeated readings and interactive transactions with language” (Jordan and Harrell, 2000, p. 74).

Liu (2000) conducted a study to examine the effect of RT to address its theoretical and pedagogical issues in an intermediate L2 writing class in a US university. There were 14 students enrolled in the writing course designed to improve the writing skills of students through the use of literature. His study showed that RT encourages students to “participate directly in interpretation and reflection on the readings, reading responses and their own writings” (2000, p. 359). In addition, Liu’s study also showed that in a classroom where students come from similar linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds, RT enhances cultural awareness between the home culture and the target culture through meaning negotiation and cultural comparisons and reflections.

This current study seeks to extend Liu’s study to examine the theoretical and pedagogical impact of RT in the Japanese EFL classroom. The research questions for this study are:

- (i) Can RT lower affective filters of Japanese EFL learners in the classroom?
- (ii) Do students have positive experiences with RT in class?
- (iii) Does RT have any impact on Japanese EFL learners’ writing?

The Study: Contextual Background

RT was implemented in a class of first-year intermediate Japanese EFL learners enrolled in a Core English class at the University of Niigata Prefecture in the northern part of Japan. There were 25 students in the class and the course ran for 15 weeks. It was

observed that most of the students were afraid to engage in group discussions in English due to their lack of confidence in their spoken English. RT was implemented in class to increase students' confidence in speaking English and to cultivate their reading habits as a means to improve their overall proficiency. A graded reader, *Alice in Wonderland* was used for the RT activity. Students first read the story and the teacher created a problem scenario (see the Appendix) based on a scene in the book. Students then discussed and wrote a script based on the scenario. They then rehearsed and performed the script before the class. A performance rubric was used to evaluate the students' performance.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study was derived from the following sources: (i) the teacher's own reflexive journals after the RT lesson (ii) students' comments on their writing journals (iii) survey on students' reactions towards the RT activity and (iv) student writing of a script for the RT performance. In this study, students' reactions to specific phases of RT activities will be described and analysed: Script negotiation, Script rehearsal, and Script performance.

Phase One: Script negotiation

Students were instructed to discuss a problem scenario created from Chapter 8 of *Alice in Wonderland* (see the [Appendix](#)): To create the script, students were instructed to create several roles in their script: Alice, gardeners, narrators etc. They also had to write an introduction to set the mood for the story. During the negotiation of the problem scenario, it was observed that students were actively involved in discussing the problem scenario deciding on how they should develop the script. Initially, some groups experienced difficulties in the script discussions as they could not think of any ideas to persuade the queen not to paint the flowers white. The teacher provided some suggestions and showed a sample script written by previous students. After a while, some groups became more confident and suggested some interesting ideas. During the script writing phase, no students approached the teacher for help in the use of English expressions. Students debated on how they should develop their script and were thoroughly engaged in their discussions. It was observed that even passive students were interested in sharing their ideas.

The atmosphere of the class was different from the routine class lesson. Some members broke into laughter while other groups were deeply engrossed in the script discussion. Students were more relaxed and their facial expressions showed they enjoyed the script discussion and script writing activity. Except for one group who experienced some difficulties at some points in their script negotiations, all other groups were deeply engaged in the script negotiation. The interest factor in learning English was enhanced because of the intellectual and emotional involvement in the RT activity which involved reading, speaking, writing, and listening. Compared to normal class lessons, the RT activity evoked a great amount of interactions amongst group members. At the end of the RT activity, one student wrote about her script discussion experience (all student comments left as written without correction):

(student comment) *I enjoyed discussing the script. In our group, every student gave their own ideas to make the story interesting. We came up with many ideas and exchanged opinions. In the end, we couldn't adopt all ideas but all my group members enjoyed*

discussing the content of the script.

Phase Two: Rehearsing the script

When each group had completed their script, they showed it to the teacher who then provided some language support to help them improve their lines. When the teacher had read and approved the script, the group began to rehearse their scripts. During the script rehearsal, the teacher also emphasized the importance of pronunciation and good articulation in order for students to put on a good performance. Students were also encouraged to use sounds (footsteps, moaning sounds, etc.) to impress the audience. Initially, some students were hesitant to read their lines but when they saw other students performing and laughing, they began to conceive the rehearsal as a fun-oriented activity. In the process of rehearsal, they also gained progressive experience with the text. One student wrote about her willingness to invest time to prepare for the script rehearsal:

(student comment) I think I worked really hard on this work. I wrote the script and send it to my group members by email. Moreover, I tried to memorise lines. However, some of us forgot our lines because we were nervous. So I think we should rehearse and practise more.

As RT is an ‘oral interpretation’ activity (Adams, 2003) repeated script reading allows students to develop phonemic awareness and phonics which lead to an overall reading fluency. During the rehearsal, the teacher used a tape recorder to record students’ performance and as students listened to their own rehearsals, they were able to further improve on their script reading. One student wrote how she benefited from listening to the taped rehearsal:

(student comment) Before the actual performance in front of the audience, we did a rehearsal and then we taped our performance. It helped us. We could check our pronunciation, rate of speaking and accent. Listening to our voice is important. Thank you for giving us such a rich activity.

Phase Three: Performing the script

The performance of the script was conducted immediately after the rehearsal. It was observed that students were excited and eager to perform their script in front of an audience. The teacher recorded the script reading performance, and a rubric was used to evaluate students’ performances (see Table 2). A survey was conducted after the RT performance. Students were asked to write down their reactions to the different phases of the RT activity. One student shared his experience of the RT performance in the survey (minor editing to retain authenticity of comments):

(student comment) It was a very nice lesson! I was very surprised that every student all students play their roles well. Each group also devised their play very well. Everyone spoke clearly and the script performance was easy to understand. I think students put a lot of efforts to practise their scripts for this drama activity.

Theoretical Considerations of RT as a Drama Activity for Japanese EFL Learners

Can RT lower affective filters of Japanese EFL learners in the classroom?

Research on individual differences in second language (L2) acquisition has shown that language proficiency is affected by affective variables such as attitudes, motivation, and language anxiety. Horwitz, K., Horwitz, M. & Cope, (1986) defines language anxiety as: a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process (p. 128). A major problem in motivating Japanese EFL learners to speak English in class is due to their level of anxiety in speaking English.

However, through RT, anxiety-ridden English instructions are converted into living language through intense creative energy as students become engaged in their script negotiation and performance. As Adams (2003) suggests, the performance elements in RT allow students to focus on preparing for the show and thus students are fully engaged in the script performance through using every emotion, sense, and voice. During the RT lesson, it was observed that the built-in collaborative nature of script writing and the performance offer students a sense of security. One student wrote how he managed to overcome his anxiety due to the support of his group members during the RT activity: (student comment) *This activity was a opportunity for me to improve my speaking skill. At first, I was worried about my English skill. However, this activity was a group activity so I could relax and enjoy it. My group members supported me, so I thank them from the bottom of my heart. I wouldn't have a confidence without them. Therefore, I am happy I could participate this activity with my classmates.*

RT encourages healthy teamwork since imaginative interaction with peers is required to produce a script. Another student wrote about her experiences with her group members during script negotiation:

(student comment) *I made a script with my classmates. We thought how to persuade the Queen not to change the colour of roses. My classmates thought a lot of ideas. This was very nice, so we could make the script. I enjoyed this activity. In addition, we could cooperate with my classmates.*

Although several students wrote that they were initially afraid to speak English before an audience, they were able to overcome their own anxiety through collaborative efforts of their team members. However with RT, the collaborative aspects of RT allow students to perform in a protected and non-threatening environment where progress can be measured and support from members within the group is available (Adams, 2003). In addition, constant learning reinforcement disguised in rehearsal activity also helps to establish students' confidence in performance. One student wrote how RT experience has helped her overcome her anxiety in speaking English:

(student comment) *I'm usually shy to speak in front of people. So this activity is a practice for overcoming my weakness! If I continue this activity, both my classmates and I will be able to speak English without any fear or anxiety.*

The script negotiation helps Japanese EFL learners learn the use of communicative English in an unhurried and non-threatening way. Instead of perceiving the script performance as an 'anxiety-ridden' activity, a majority of students viewed it as a fun and

enjoyable activity. As one student wrote:

(Student comment) *During the performance, I felt a little nervous but I enjoyed it. I was glad that some of the classmates smiled at our performance. Anyway, it was a fun activity for me.*

Do Japanese EFL learners have positive experiences with RT?

One of the main aims of the study is to examine Japanese EFL learners' experiences with RT. A survey consisting of 5 questions was designed to investigate students' response to the RT activity. The results of the survey tabulated in percentage are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 : Students' response to the RT activity

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Enjoyed this activity.	72%	24%	4%	0%	0%
Enjoyed the script reading activity.	52%	32%	12%	4%	0%
I think I would be more enthusiastic if I had more time to prepare.	48%	28%	20%	4%	0%
I would have been more enthusiastic if I had played a different role.	24%	20%	40%	12%	4%
This activity increased my enthusiasm to read other graded readers.	48%	28%	20%	4%	0%

The results of the survey showed that students are generally positive about their RT experiences. One significant result of the survey showed that 86% of students agreed that they enjoyed the RT activity. About 84% of the students also stated that they enjoyed the script reading activity. Some reasons for students' positive response towards the RT activity include:

- (student comment) *The RT performance was fun.*
- (student comment) *It was a creative activity.*
- (student comment) *We had to perform for an audience.*
- (student comment) *We can gain confidence in speaking before an audience.*
- (student comment) *It is an effective way to improve our pronunciation.*
- (student comment) *We have opportunity to speak English.*
- (student comment) *We can collaborate with our friends.*

It was observed that because *Alice in Wonderland* was dramatised in class, the interest in the lesson was greatly increased. As Adams (2003) suggests, the class becomes livelier through RT as the level of intellectual and emotional investment is heightened by interaction. RT allows Japanese EFL learners to participate in the story and so they become transformed into participants and thus they were able to identify with the characters in *Alice in Wonderland*. By putting themselves in the shoes of the characters they portrayed, students

were able to grapple with the emotions, tensions, and nuances of each character in the story. One student, who was notoriously passive during English lesson, was observed to be rather active during the RT lesson. He later recounted his experience of the RT activity:

(student comment) *It was enjoyable for me to do this script performance activity. I think this activity is effective as it involves writing, reading and speaking.*

As the mind, emotions, and sensory responses are engaged at the same time, RT transformed participants with responsibility to think and feel and create words that come alive as human experience. One female student also wrote about her positive experience in using her voice to portray the character in her script performance:

(student comment) *In this script activity, I played the role of Alice. I tried to make my voice sound as pretty as possible because the voice of Alice in the movie is very pretty. During the performance, I was a little nervous but I could role-play Alice well. We were able to deliver a good performance.*

The problem scenario allowed students to perform an imaginative and original script conclusion to the story. It was observed that every student became transformed into participants in *Alice in Wonderland* with responsibility for knowing what to say and how to use their voices to make their lines come alive as human experience. The dialogues created were also interesting as students performed their scripts with feeling and dramatic expression. As students are aware of that the script is to be performed before an appreciative classroom audience, they find their self-images being raised to new levels of esteem.

During the RT performance, a rubric was used to evaluate students' performance in RT in five areas: knowledge, presentation, voice projection, and overall area (see Table 2):

Table 2: RT rubric for evaluating students' performance

Area	1	2	3	4
Knowledge	Students do not interpret the story	Students interpret the story	Students interpret the story imaginatively	Students interpret the story creatively and with depth
Presentation	Students do not seem to be aware of what they should be doing at all.	Students do not appear confident about what they are doing.	Students appear to be fairly prepared.	Group is well prepared.
Voice	Hard to understand.	Not so well articulated	Well articulated. Easy to understand.	Entire skit was clear, concise, and well articulated.
Projection	Used no expression or inappropriate expression	Some expression	Used expression in their voices, loud and soft.	Great expression in their voices, loud and soft.
Overall Performance	No enthusiasm	Some enthusiasm	Good enthusiasm	Great enthusiasm

It was observed that all groups scored three in all areas; two groups scored 4. In addition, RT provides students an authentic communicative context to practise their spoken English. This is important for Japanese EFL learners who have little opportunity to speak English in a monolingual sociolinguistic environment. A number of students in class actually have very few opportunities to interact with foreigners in English in their socialization experience. Except for one or two students who had previously lived or studied overseas, few had very close encounters with native speakers of English. RT provides immediate motivations for Japanese EFL learners to focus on improving their reading fluency since they are performing the scripts for an audience and are given a limited time to put on a show. This immediate motivation compels students to improve their spoken English. One student wrote about her RT experience:

(student comment) *When we read the script emotionally, it is like real and natural conversation. We made the script with colloquial expression and we formed many natural expressions which we didn't know. So this activity improved our spoken English.*

However, one major limitation of RT is that students with low English proficiency tend to find it difficult to write a script by themselves. Some students wrote in the survey that the script discussion was difficult but they were motivated to study English after the performance:

(student comment) *Discussion of this activity is very hard for me because I did not have any ideas and couldn't talk well. The activity made me nervous so I couldn't speak well. But I think my English skills will improve through this practice. Today's activity made me realize that I should study English more.*

Does RT Have Any Impact on Students' Writing?

One of the aims of this study is to examine whether RT has any impact on the writing of Japanese EFL learners. The teacher was amazed by the fluency, creativity, and imagination of the script produced which reflected those of proficient writers—fluent, accurate, and complex. Although students did not receive any instructions on the pragmatic aspect of language use, students were able to apply cognitive strategies to express different language functions such as answering questions, solving problems, expressing opinions, arguing, and persuading in their scripts. For instance, one group wrote how Alice managed to persuade the Queen to change her mind about painting the flowers red.

Alice: Why did you order these gardeners to change the white roses to red one?

Queen: Red is my color. White doesn't match me.

Alice: I don't think so. White suits you too. I think you will stand out with white colour. If you wear white, you will be very attractive.

Narrator: Then Alice brought a white rose and handed it to the Queen. The Queen received it and put in her head. She gradually changed her mind.

As suggested by Olsenland (2007), students who apply cognitive strategies (goal setting, ask questions, make predictions, monitor, reflect, and evaluate) are likely to create meaningful text. The problem scenario in the RT allows students to ask questions about the development of the story and the role of the character. Compared to the traditional writing task, the performance slant in RT motivates students to monitor, reflect, and evaluate their

script. Students who are proficient writers use writing as a means to transform their knowledge through reflection and analysis of the character rather than simply regurgitating what they have read from the story. One student wrote how she decided to portray the Queen in her script:

(student comment) *I thought it is good to change the story, so I suggested the line, 'The Queen hates milk, so she hates white colour'. Also I played the role of the Queen and so I tried to change my voice.*

Research in writing shows that motivation influences writing development (Graham & Harris, 2009). Motivation includes a desire to write, one's attitude toward writing, persistence in writing, and self-efficacy, or the belief that one can produce a desired result (such as a persuasive essay). It would be true to say that RT provides strong motivation for Japanese EFL learners to become more proficient writers. In fact, students took their own initiative to improve their scripts through multiple negotiations to decide which lines to keep and what to edit and revise in order to produce an original script. Although RT was time-consuming—the RT activity was conducted in four lessons—students were willing to put in extra hours of hardwork to produce a well-written script. However, it was observed that several students with a lower level of English proficiency found the script writing cognitively demanding and experienced difficulties writing the script. As one student wrote in the survey:

(student comment) *I felt it was a little difficult to write the script because we had to make it so that the audience can understand the story easily.*

Conclusion : Implications for the Classroom

There is no doubt that RT has pedagogical relevance and implications in the Japanese EFL classroom. RT takes the study of foreign language out of the rule book and into the mouths of living people. It may be argued that the previous learning experiences of Japanese EFL learners may not be a natural match for the use of RT. However, if RT is set up carefully, it provides Japanese EFL learners useful language practice in a real communicative context. As Yashima (2002, p. 63) suggests, to encourage Japanese students to communicate in English, lessons should be designed to enhance students' interests in different cultures as well as to reduce anxiety and build confidence in communication. RT can be harnessed to help Japanese EFL learners develop confidence in order to deal with unpredictability inherent in real world communication as well as enhance their interest in foreign literature. RT is a powerful pedagogical tool in the EFL classroom as it encourages student participation and is non-threatening to students (Liu, 2000). However, as the script writing is cognitively demanding, RT is more suitable for intermediate and advanced EFL students. There is a need to explore fully which aspects of RT—script negotiation, script writing, or script performance—are relevant for which groups of EFL learners in other teaching contexts.

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Appendix

Sample Scenario and Instructions for Readers Theatre from *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 2000)

Read the following scene adapted from Chapter 8 “Inside the Garden.”

Near Alice was a small tree with flowers on it. There were three gardeners by the tree.

‘Be careful, Five!’ one of them said.

‘I’m always careful, Seven,’ answered Five.

Alice went to them. ‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

‘We’re making the flowers red,’ one of the gardeners said.

‘That’s strange!’ thought Alice. ‘Why?’ she asked.

‘Well, Miss, the Queen wanted flowers with red flowers on them. But this tree’s got white flowers! We don’t want the Queen to see it. She’ll be angry and cut off our heads. So we’re making the flowers red before she sees them.’

Imagine you are Alice. You disagree with the Queen’s decision to paint the flowers red. You decided to stop the Queen from changing the color of the flower. Based on your reading of the character of Alice and the Queen, create an original conversational script to persuade the Queen to change her mind.

Sample script

Alice: Hello, Madam. My name is Alice.

(The Queen was surprised to see a little girl. She decided to find out where she came from.)

Queen: Who are you? Where are you from? What do you want from me?

(Alice was afraid of the Queen but pretended to be calm and confident)

Alice: I . . .

*Your script should be at least half a page long and you should include a short introduction and the role of a narrator.

Sample Introduction:

Alice left the tea party and wandered into a strange garden. She saw two gardeners painting the flowers red. She was surprised and asked them why. The gardeners told Alice that the Queen had ordered them to do so. Alice felt it was a bad idea. She decided to stop the Queen from doing this.

Instructions : (1) Use as much English as possible when discussing the script. (2) Rehearse your script when you have completed it (3) Perform your script when you are ready to do so.

Marks awarded for: (a) creativity (b) language accuracy in writing (c) observation of English used in discussion