

Incorporating Reader's Theater in Japanese University EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

Reader's Theater is an activity that is often utilized in classrooms for younger learners. However, this activity, which fosters a cooperative learning environment, can also be used to increase the fluency of Japanese university EFL learners. This article explains how the author uses Reader's Theater (hereafter called RT) with adult learners and how it can be scaffolded in a Japanese university setting through the introduction of information on the Japanese voice acting industry. Moreover, the benefits of implementing RT in the EFL classroom, potential challenges when doing so, and different ways of addressing these challenges are also discussed. The article focuses on the use of cooperative learning strategies, such as the jigsaw technique, which can be used to enhance student voice acting skills, delivery, pronunciation, and teamwork. Utilizing strategies like these can help ensure that RT will be an engaging activity for students in an English-medium classroom.

Introduction

Despite studying vocabulary and grammar for university entrance exams, Japanese university students are still challenged when it comes to using appropriate vocabulary words and grammatical structure, which affects their overall fluency (Iwamoto, 2016). In order to address the challenge of improving fluency, Reader's Theater (RT) is a useful classroom activity. RT is a form of "performance reading" in which the reader must attempt to take on the voice of the character, as well as the character's attitude and personality (Keen, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008; Worthy, Broaddus, & Ivey, 2001). RT involves repeated reading that can increase fluency and impact vocabulary growth due multiple exposures to new words (Keen, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008). Furthermore, RT is defined as a "method of using drama techniques that have transcended the theater and moved into the reading classroom" (Thienkalaya & Chusanachoti, 2020, p. 307). Given these definitions, readers in an RT

activity are expected to read passages fluently and expressively to the audience (Stokes & Young, 2018). Liu (2000) explains that through RT, “meanings of a given text are constructed and/or reconstructed through dramatic exploration, which invites creativity and imagination, and conforms to no one style” (p. 354). Thus, RT enables students to unleash their creativity through their own interpretation of the text, while developing their fluency through rereading the scripts. In addition, improving social skills such as cooperation and teamwork is evident among peers in RT, as RT also allows students to work in groups, which can be considered cooperative learning (Karabag, 2015). Japanese university students, in this case, can benefit and improve their use of English as a foreign language through an RT performance. Specifically, the improvement of fluency and vocabulary knowledge will be done through a performative activity such as RT, rather than limiting the students’ output to written exams (Iwamoto, 2016; Keen, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008). In this next part, I would like to discuss how RT can be incorporated into Japanese university EFL classrooms using cooperative learning and explain how I have been doing so in my English classes through the use of Japanese voice acting culture. In order to motivate the students, the idea of gamification of RT where students vote for the best performers will be also discussed.

Background

Reader's Theater: Definition, Benefits, and Challenges

Unlike traditional plays on stage, the performers of RT perform on stage without memorizing the script (Moran, 2006). In other words, the script will be held by the performers and their actions in the script will be implied rather than physically executed. Jordan and Harrell (2000) 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” (p.74). With this in mind, RT is an effective drama technique that enhances student reading skills and fluency as it provides an opportunity for students to practice speech authentically and facilitate comprehension for readers. It has also been shown that struggling readers may increase their reading comprehension and reading fluency through RT (Mraz, Nichols, Caldwell, Beisley, Sargent, & Rupley, 2013). Although RT was originally used with younger learners, it can also be done with adult learners. In a study by Tanner and Chugg (2018), adults ranging in age from 18 to 36 were given four RT activities over a span of 14 weeks. Positive results were shown for fluency, accuracy and self-confidence in speaking English. The results of this study show that RT can be utilized with a wide range of age groups.

Another benefit that can be gained through RT is increased motivation. In a study that focused on RT for Japanese EFL learners, Ng and Boucher-Yip (2013) highlight the presence of higher motivation among students because of the expectation to perform with their group in a limited amount of time, as well as to perform realistically for the sake of an audience. In addition, this sense of immediacy is said to be important among Japanese EFL learners, especially with their homogeneous language environment outside the classroom (Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2013). If student and teacher expectations are clear, students will better understand the goal of the activity and be motivated by these expectations to perform through RT.

Inevitably, anxiety may be prevalent in EFL students taking part in a RT activity. Ohata (2005) states that there are three types of anxiety that can be present in the EFL classroom setting: state anxiety, trait anxiety, and language anxiety. State anxiety occurs when an EFL learner faces a certain situation or condition. In this case, the RT may become a situation where anxiety from students may manifest. The realization by students that they have to present in front of others creates anxiety. Trait anxiety, on the other hand, is believed to be a part of the person to begin with, wherein learners tend to be anxious by any situation that they are faced with (Worde, 1998). Finally, language anxiety is the “feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). In this case, students may face any or all of these kinds of anxiety due to the unfamiliarity of the RT activity and how it may affect their confidence when reading a script with unfamiliar words or contexts.

Although voice acting in accordance with a character is not necessary for a narrator, it may be challenging for the students to find the proper intonation unless they fully comprehend the lines in the script (voice acting will be described in a following section). This is also the case in other characters. In order to produce proper intonation, students are expected to acquire full comprehension of the script, including the vocabulary and phrases that were used (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008). Since the vocabulary knowledge of students in each class may vary, there is a possibility that low-level students may be challenged in comprehending the script. Hence, may produce an awkward intonation that may not fit the situation in the story.

Aside from the challenges facing students, teachers also face multiple challenges in the use of RT in the classroom. One challenge for teachers is finding an appropriate script for the RT activity. Although resources can be found online, some may have grammatical errors and misspellings which should be checked before distributing to students. It may also be

time-consuming work for teachers to find an appropriate script for the level of their students. Related to this, the number of lines of each character in a script may be unbalanced. For example, in the script of "Hansel and Gretel" (Appendix A), the father has the fewest lines among all the characters, which may create a challenge for the teacher to properly assess the student playing that particular role compared to the other roles.

Cooperative Learning: Definition, Benefits, and Challenges

The term cooperative learning has been widely used in language teaching. Cooperative learning centers on working in teams in order to meet certain criteria, while students are individually held accountable for the content of the activity (Felder & Brent, 2007). Thus, cooperative learning enables students to work in groups with a shared goal (Kato, Bolstad, & Watari, 2015). In addition, during cooperative learning, the teacher and students jointly construct the knowledge in the classroom. According to Maftoon and Ziafar (2013), cooperative learning in the Japanese university EFL context was perceived to be a challenge due to the traditional classroom dynamic wherein the teacher simply transfers knowledge to students. However, it has been suggested that the inclusion of cooperative learning in Japanese university EFL context should be done in order to promote critical thinking and reasoning strategies (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013).

Cooperative learning has been proven beneficial in EFL classrooms. Rushatz (1992) suggested that "Cooperative learning strategies strive to create group situations that will foster support and feedback systems while developing decision making, problem-solving and general social interaction skills" (p. 5). Since RT is an interactive activity that involves both students and teachers from practice to evaluation, it is important to take cooperation into account for RT to be more effective and successful. One of the most common cooperative learning techniques is the jigsaw technique. Jigsaw is defined as a technique where students are grouped into heterogenous teams and study a subtopic with members of other teams who have the same subtopic (Slavin, 1980). In other words, students are grouped according to their home group and their expert group. The home group is their original groups which have various subtopics to talk about, and the expert group is where the members from different groups gather to talk about the same subtopic. The reason why students are divided into their home groups and expert groups is to ensure that they learn not only within their own performance team, but that they also learn from other students who face similar challenges (Ishafit, Sulisworo, & Firdausy, 2016). In the case of RT, home groups are where students can discuss their scenes within their performance team, whereas expert groups are where

students with the same roles can generate ideas and opinions about the role that they are going to perform. This grouping enables familiarization, not only with the story, but also with the roles that the students are playing. Moreover, it enhances students' creativity and critical thinking skills as they discuss what kind of methods to use to become the character that they are playing in the RT. Using the jigsaw technique to prepare for the RT activity creates team-based learning. This type of cooperative learning may encourage discussion and clarification of ideas, as well enable students to become open to a diversity of ideas and perspectives through interaction with their peers (Cooper, Robinson, & McKinney, 1990; Gokhale, 1995).

Although anxiety has been highlighted as one of the potential challenges of RT, this can be addressed through cooperative tasks such as the jigsaw technique where students can meet in their home groups and expert groups. In this case, students are able to help and teach each other in order to ensure that they can reach their goals towards the RT activity.

Challenges, however, have been seen in cooperative learning groups. For example, there are students in the group who may not contribute to group discussions (Scherman & du Toit, 2008). In terms of EFL learning, different English levels between students may also cause unequal contribution when sharing ideas. In addition, switching groups from home groups and expert groups may also exhaust and cause demotivation to students who are preparing for RT due to the possible confusion with the instructions given.

Addressing the Potential Challenges Through Voice Acting in Japan

In Japan, one activity that can be considered to be similar to RT is voice acting. Voice acting has become a part of Japanese pop culture and it has a huge fan following. In Japan, *seiyuu*, or voice actors, can be distinguished from voice actors from other countries due to their celebrity status (Heinst, 2017). Voice acting in Japan is widespread since it is done not only in commercials and in public spaces, but also in *anime* series. This enables voice actors to produce musical work for anime theme songs as well (Nozawa, 2016). Yamasaki (2014) states one factor that contributes to making voice acting so recognizable is that voice actors may play more than two characters with completely different voices in an *anime* series. In addition, the normal speaking voices of these voice actors are different from any of the voices of the characters that they play. In addition to this, Yamasaki (2014) mentions that voice acting is more of a public figure type of occupation, with most voice actors and actresses having full-time careers in the industry, including singing as "idols" and catering to fans in "idol" style. This is why the voice acting industry in Japan is so well-known by the public.

Given the popularity of voice acting in Japan, it provides a good example when introducing RT to students.

In RT, students may change their voice according to the character which they play. This allows the students to become expressive through changing their voice in accordance to the interpretation of the character(s) which they are voicing (Keen, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008). In my classes, I provide some facts and information about the voice acting industry in Japan and use it as an opportunity to introduce RT to my students. Next, I provide a brainstorming activity where I show two photos: (a) clipart of a voice actor and (b) clipart of a reader's theater performance (Appendix B). This is where I ask them to think of words which they can associate with these photos. After the warm-up activity, I say to them, "Let's be voice actors through Reader's Theater!" With these words, students are able to get a picture in their mind of how the RT activity will be performed in the classroom. After introducing RT through the analogy to voice acting, preparation for the rehearsals and cooperative group activities will be done in the classroom.

Given the idea of voice acting in Japan, the students are able to contribute ideas on how to use their voices depending on the character in their groups. The information about voice acting which is incorporated with RT lessens the anxiety of the students towards the unfamiliarity of RT. Specifically, students are able to imagine something familiar from their pop culture, and correlate this with the activity. In terms of the student assessments, voice acting becomes a part of the criteria wherein regardless of the length of the parts, students are expected to stay in character throughout the RT.

Reader's Theater Activity: Hansel and Gretel

Selection of Script

The teacher selecting the script should ensure that the level is appropriate to the students. Since I teach elementary level students with TOEIC scores ranging from 285 to 395, a script that is appropriate to their vocabulary level is chosen. In addition, a sense of familiarity to the story may help the students understand the character further. This is why one of the famous fairy tales, Hansel and Gretel, was chosen for the students. The number of students was also taken into account. In this case, there are 20 students in class who were divided into four groups with five members each. In this script of Hansel and Gretel, there are five characters.

Through cooperative learning, an analysis of the script may also be helpful to address the issue of script appropriateness. Aside from the screening that teachers can do of scripts,

an activity where students circle new vocabulary words may enhance critical thinking skills and vocabulary development. For critical thinking, students can find a mistake and think of ways to correct the script. For vocabulary development, students may circle the new words and put them on their vocabulary list. In addition, asking the teacher questions about the script can also create an interactive classroom when it comes to analyzing the script. This is also a good scaffolding method to prepare students for the work they will need to do in their home groups and their expert groups. In order to face the challenges that may exist in RT, it is very important to have good communication between students, as well as between students and the teacher.

Home Groups and Expert Groups

I would like to give an example of how I implemented the jigsaw technique in the classroom using the fairy tale, "Hansel and Gretel" (Appendix A). Students discussed their performance in home and expert groups. In this case, there were four groups in a classroom of 20 students. If there were less than 20 students in the class or a sudden absence from any of the students, some students would have had to perform two roles, such as the narrator and father.

Table 1

Home and Expert Groups in Reader's Theater for Hansel and Gretel

	Home Group 1	Home Group 2	Home Group 3	Home Group 4
Expert Group 1	Hansel	Hansel	Hansel	Hansel
Expert Group 2	Gretel	Gretel	Gretel	Gretel
Expert Group 3	Witch	Witch	Witch	Witch
Expert Group 4	Narrator	Narrator	Narrator	Narrator
Expert Group 5	Father	Father	Father	Father

During preparation time, I give time for the home groups to meet and discuss their chosen roles and their lines for the RT. After this, students within the expert groups share their ideas on how they will be able to play their roles fully. If there are any questions or if

clarification is needed about a specific role, the members of the expert group should advise each other on how the role should be played.

Assessment of Reader's Theater Presentations

In the Japanese EFL context, I have chosen four criteria to assess Japanese university students in the RT activity: voice acting, delivery, pronunciation, and teamwork. Through a rubric (Table 2), I am able to assess the students equally regardless of the length of their parts in the RT.

The first criterion to take into account is the voice acting of the students. Since information about the voice acting industry is used as part of the introduction to RT for Japanese EFL students, the way the students change their voice depending on the characters they play will be evaluated. This allows students to dramatize using their voices. The presence of voice dramatization in the RT allows students to gain confidence in using the language in proper context (Hillyard, 2016). Incorporating dramatization into RT may enable the integration of language dramatically while creating a fun and meaningful language learning classroom (Sirisrimangkorn, 2018). In RT, it is more challenging for students to alter their voice if they must perform two or more roles. It is a test of their creativity, while at the same time, also helping them to improve their speaking skills.

The second criterion to be considered is the delivery of the students. Delivery is divided into two sub-criteria: intonation and voice clarity. Intonation is the rising and falling inflection of the voice and students must change their voice and voice act depending on the character that is being played. Depending on the emotion of the character, the voice intonation can be changed. It is also important for evaluation to assess if the students are speaking and acting in a way that fits within the context of the story. Similar to drama where oral skills are developed through the practice of intonation and pronunciation (Ashton-Hay, 2005), RT can also be used as a way to challenge students to use proper intonation following the context of the story and the emotion of the character. Voice clarity, on the other hand, focuses on how the actor's lines are being understood by the audience. Specifically, the volume of the voice is also assessed. Students need to focus on how the lines that they are reading are conveyed and if they are being well-understood by those who are listening. This is done by ensuring that their voices are heard within classroom.

The third assessed criterion focuses on the pronunciation of the students. In a study on RT by Ruengwathakee (2021), pronunciation improved even though the RT activity was not originally designed specifically for pronunciation. Moreover, the study showed that the

participants' pronunciation skills had improved through RT. Given the benefits of RT for pronunciation, students are also assessed if they were able to pronounce the words correctly in the script. They must show the results of their practice before the actual presentation.

Finally, the teamwork in the group will be taken into consideration. RT, being a group activity, provides an opportunity for students to work in groups. It is important to take a look at how students communicate with each other during the actual presentation. During rehearsals students are encouraged to practice and use English with their fellow students. Furthermore, RT allows students to practice with an intensity that is not usually present during the regular lessons (Matheny, 2003). Given this, the preparation which the students have done will be assessed based on how smoothly they communicate with their group members during the presentation.

Given the four criteria for assessment, the table below shows the rubric that I used to assess my students with a TOEIC score of 285-395. I assess them according to the following criteria: voice acting, delivery, pronunciation, and teamwork. In this sample rubric, the highest score is A while the lowest is N.

Table 2

Sample Rubric for Reader's Theater

	N	C	B	A
Voice Acting	The student did not change his/her voice at all.	The student was able to partially change his/her voice, but only in few scenes.	The student was able to change his/her voice in volume and character, but there was a lack of clarity in some scenes.	The student was able to change his/her voice in volume and character according to the story and context.
Delivery	The student was monotonous and the lines were not delivered clearly	4-5 words were unclear, and intonation was not consistent.	2-3 words were unclear, but was able to maintain intonation.	The student was able to deliver his/her lines clearly with proper intonation

Pronunciation	The student had 5 or more mis-pronunciations	The student had 4 or 5 mis-pronunciations	The student had 2-3 mis-pronunciations	The student had 0-1 mis-pronunciations.
Teamwork	The student had to pause and ask questions to his/her classmates out loud in Japanese. The student was given explicit signals by his/her classmates.	The student had to pause and was given a signal multiple times. However, the student did not speak Japanese outside the script.	The student only had to pause once and waited for a signal from a classmate.	The student had a smooth transition without having to wait for the next person to speak, nor for an <i>obvious</i> signal from a classmate.

Gamification

Another factor to consider when addressing the challenges of RT in the classroom is the use of gamification elements. Gamification is “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011, p. 1). In the case of activities that require performance such as RT, I create poll-based gamification elements wherein the students may choose who are the best actors, narrators and groups. This will be done after all groups have performed and students will be given a QR Code to cast their votes on the same day. After that, an awards ceremony for the best actors, narrator and group will be held on a different day. I believe that this helps motivate students to perform the RT, while also ensuring that it is a fun and interactive activity for everyone involved.

Reflection: Successes and Failures

Through RT, I was able to observe various students and how they performed through RT. One of the successful moments involved the use of voice according to the character. Most of the students were able to visualize the character and use their voice according to the character’s emotion, and the setting. By introducing RT through the voice acting industry in Japan, students react with “Oh, I get it.” Then, they are able to use their voice during practice. Moreover, the students are able to adapt to a possible issue. For example, the absence of a

group member can affect the performance. Yet, there were students who were willing to play two roles right before the presentation. The unforeseen circumstances did not affect the students in a negative manner. Instead, some showed willingness to volunteer to voice a character on the absentee's behalf.

In spite of these successes, challenges can be inevitable. For example, there are students who may lack motivation to participate in RT even though teamwork was being partially scored. In addition, students may still mispronounce words due to the practice time being limited to 10-15 minutes for two meetings before the presentation. In order to improve this, doing a script review or analysis with the students prior to the practice may be helpful for them not only to familiarize themselves with the pronunciation, but also with any unfamiliar words.

Conclusion

RT may be challenging for students if it is not properly scaffolded in the classroom. The reason I use the Japanese voice acting industry as an example is because of its prominence in Japanese pop culture. By saying, "Let's be voice actors through RT!" and beginning a warm-up comparing voice acting and RT, students are able to picture in their mind what to do in the activity. In addition, it is important to create a cooperative learning environment, especially for students who might feel anxious and overwhelmed by the RT activity. By using the jigsaw technique, students are able to speak to their peers and know their perspectives about the characters that they are playing. More importantly, it ensures that the students cooperate as a group in this activity. Through RT, students can enhance their creativity and critical thinking skills, and at the same time, improve their voice clarity and delivery in a way that will help prepare them for real-life English communication.

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Appendix A

Hansel and Gretel

Source:

<https://wcdpl.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Hansel%20and%20Gretel%20Readers%20Theatre.pdf>

Reader Roles: (1) Narrator, (2) Father, (3) Hansel, (4) Gretel, and the (5) Witch

Scene 1 (at home)

Narrator: Hansel and Gretel live near a dark forest with their father.

Father: Good morning, children. Did you sleep well?

Hansel: Yes, I slept very well.

Gretel: Me too, Father.

Father: Excellent. What are you going to do today?

Hansel: We are going to go play in the forest!

Father: Okay, we'll be careful. You may get lost if you go too deeply into the woods. Don't talk to strangers!

Hansel: Don't worry, Father.

Gretel: We'll be careful!

Scene 2 (in the forest)

Narrator: One day, they get lost deep among the trees. They try to mark their path through the woods with breadcrumbs, but the birds eat their trail.

Gretel: Hansel, where are we? It's getting late.

Hansel: I don't know, Gretel.

Gretel: I'm very hungry, I wish we hadn't used our bread to make a trail.

Hansel: Father will come and find us.

Narrator: Then, Hansel and Gretel see a pretty cottage in a clearing.

Hansel: Let's go and ask for some food!

Gretel: That is a great idea, Hansel.

Narrator: As Hansel and Gretel get closer to the house, they realize it was a very special house.

Hansel: Look! It's made of sweets.

Gretel: And gingerbread!

Hansel: Let's try some.

Gretel: It's delicious!

Narrator: Hansel and Gretel nibble away like hungry mice. Suddenly, an old woman opened the door.

Witch: You are eating my pretty house! Are you hungry?

Hansel and Gretel: (jumping in shock and dropping their food) We're so sorry.

Hansel: We didn't mean to eat your house...

Gretel: ...but we are so hungry.

Witch: (smiling sweetly) Come inside, dear children! You poor things, let me give you some proper food!

Narrator: Hansel and Gretel step inside the house. Then the old woman locks the door!

Witch: How dare you eat my cottage! I will fatten you up and eat you, boy! And you, lazy girl, can get to work doing chores for me!

Hansel and Gretel: No, we didn't mean to. We're sorry.

Narrator: The witch locks Hansel in a cage. She was a very wicked witch!

Witch: Little girl, get me some gingerbread and sweets for your brother to eat. He will get nice and round if I feed him sweets every day, and then he will be very tasty.

Gretel: No, I won't.

Witch: Then, I will eat you both now!

Hansel: Please Gretel, do as she says.

Narrator: Each day, the witch fed Hansel lots of sweets and gingerbread. And each day, she felt Hansel's finger to see if he was fat enough to eat. Hansel knew the witch couldn't see well so each time instead of poking his finger out of the cage for the witch to feel, he stuck out a skinny stick he had found.

Witch: Show me your finger, boy!

Hansel: (holding out the stick) Here it is.

Witch: (feeling the stick, and grumbling) Still too thin!

Narrator: Soon the witch grew tired of waiting.

Witch: I can't wait any longer! I shall eat you both!

Hansel and Gretel: Oh no!

Witch: Little girl, add wood to the fire in the oven so that it is nice and hot!

Narrator: Gretel had an idea to trick the witch!

Gretel: (craftily) I don't know how to! Show me how, and then I'll do it.

Witch: Silly girl! Like this!

Narrator: As the witch bent towards the oven with the wood, clever Gretel pushes her inside the oven and slammed the door.

Witch: (screaming) It's too hot! Let me out, little girl. LET ME OUT!!

Hansel: You are so clever and brave, Gretel! Thank you for saving us! I'm so happy to be outside of that cage!

Narrator: Hansel and Gretel soon find their way out of the dark forest, and back to their home, where their father was anxiously looking for them.

Hansel and Gretel: (shouting with joy and running towards the house) Father! Father! We are home.

Father: Hansel! Gretel!

Where have you been? I have been so worried about you!

Hansel: We got lost in the woods and the wicked witch tried to eat us.

Father: Oh my! I missed you very much! No more going into the woods by yourselves!

Narrator: And they all lived happily ever after!

Appendix B
Clipart for Warm-up

