

# What is Reader's Theatre and can it be Used Effectively in Large EFL Classes?

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## **Abstract**

Having the ability to make an effective presentation in English is becoming more essential in the modern, global economy. In response to this need, many Japanese universities are introducing presentation skills-type courses into the English curriculum. However, shy students can be a challenge for EFL teachers who must teach courses that emphasize public speaking, resulting in students reading directly from their script, failing to make eye contact with the audience, and speaking in a barely audible, monotone voice. Apprehensive students often fail to engage the audience and their speeches are uninteresting and lack energy. This paper introduces Reader's Theatre, a collaborative group drama activity, and discusses how the author implemented it into large English communication classes in an attempt to build student confidence, teach basic presentation skills, and encourage students to speak and read English with more expression.

**T**hroughout my 17 years of teaching EFL at the university level in Japan, I have observed that Japanese students are typically shy and inhibited about speaking with much expression in front of an entire class, particularly in courses where they are required to make short speeches or presentations. This provides a challenge for instructors tasked with teaching presentation classes. In a conversation, words alone are not enough to fully understand what your partner is trying to say. Gestures, facial expressions, posture, and intonation can all convey or add something to a message. In public speaking, voice inflection and projection, gestures to emphasize key words, and facial expressions to show emotion are considered to be

essential elements of a good presentation. Without them, a speech lacks energy, is uninteresting, and may be difficult to understand. I believe that Japanese students need to be given time to practice and learn these kinds of communication skills in a non-threatening, collaborative environment.

Over the last few years, I have had success integrating drama into some of my English communication classes in an attempt to build student confidence and make them more comfortable speaking English expressively in front of an audience. In addition to confidence building, I have found that drama is also a good method for teaching voice inflection, voice projection, and gesture use. However, acting in a drama requires students to memorize lines, which is not easy for them. I have also found that putting on an in-class play takes up a lot of class time.

I had been searching for a teaching method that could provide the same benefits as drama, but wouldn't burden students with line-memorization or take up lots of valuable class time, when I was introduced to the concept of Reader's Theatre (hereafter RT) at an academic conference about two years ago. After researching RT and successfully integrating it into a small, 4<sup>th</sup>-year seminar class (see Head, Kluge, Morris, & Rees, 2017), I wanted to see if I could do so in larger classes as well. In this paper I will explain the methodology I used to introduce RT into a first-year, required English communication course for non-English majors, discuss the results, and further explore the potential of RT in EFL as a method for helping students acquire the skills and confidence needed to try and speak English more dynamically in front of others.

### **What is Reader's Theatre?**

RT is an oral presentation of a drama, prose, or poetry by at least two people (Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2010). In RT, readers read a script adapted from an original story, and the audience imagines the action while listening to the script being read aloud. Instead of acting out the script as in a play, the goal of each performer is to read their lines aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action (Cornwell, n.d.). RT is basically group storytelling. Reading the text with expressive voices, facial expressions, and gestures is the focus of the performance. It can also liven up a story and make comprehending the text meaningful and enjoyable for students (Taylor de Caballero, 2013).

## **RT Script Selection**

RT may be performed with many kinds of literature: picture books, short-stories, parts of novels, poetry, folk tales, works of non-fiction, or newspaper and magazine articles (Cornwell, n.d.). The script selection process for an RT performance involves first reading and becoming familiar with the original text, and then transforming it into a script involving several characters. Another option is to use ready-made RT scripts, which can be downloaded for free or can be purchased online (Ng and Boucher-Yip, 2010).

## **Differences Between Stage Plays and RT**

The main difference between RT and a stage play is, as mentioned above, that in RT, readers do not have to memorize lines. According to Taylor de Caballero (2015, para. 7):

Unlike conventional theater, RT participants do not aim to memorize lines or parts; rather, they practice and deliver the written script while holding their scripts formally in one or both hands, much in the way singers in a chorus might. Also unlike regular theater, RT takes place without the use of sets, staging or props, relying solely on the participants' voices to convey the message or story.

In traditional RT, readers usually stand or sit in chairs in line and look out at the audience. Normally, they do not face other actors who are also in the performance. The readers direct their lines towards the audience. A specified narrator usually reads the lines or passages that explain an action or describe a scene or character.

## **Potential Benefits of Using RT in the Classroom**

Research on RT in EFL is lacking as most of the available data is based on research on RT in L1 settings. However, there are many potential benefits of using RT in the L2 classroom. Through repeated readings of the text, students can improve reading rate and the ability to decode words

quickly and accurately (Carrick, 2006). Role-play and theatrical text reading build oral communication skills and reading fluency because students must act in character and say their lines expressively at the right time. The shared reading experience also promotes bonding between classmates, and helps build interpersonal skills and teamwork in the classroom (Cornwell, n.d.). RT is a powerful experience for all participants because it is an active learning experience and students do not read indifferently, but instead become active participants in the story (Cornwell, n.d.). Many RT practitioners who teach in L1 settings say RT is a fun and collaborative activity (e.g., Cox, n.d.; The National Children's Book and Literacy Alliance, n.d.). RT is also said to be inclusive and work well with all kinds of students (MDEMEMO, 2012). This may be because even lower-level, less confident students can actively participate as they do not have to memorize lines. The collaborative aspect of RT seems well suited for EFL in Japan, as I have observed that many Japanese students like and value being part of a group or team, as opposed to working individually.

### **Steps for Implementing RT in the Classroom**

Taylor de Caballero (2013) provides some helpful guidelines for teachers interested in implementing RT.

- *Select a text* – it should be interesting and a little more advanced than current student reading level.
- *Class reading* – read the text with students and pronounce unfamiliar words and explain vocabulary as necessary.
- *Assign roles* – divide the text depending on the number of readers you have, or use a ready-made RT script that has a definite number of roles.
- *Practice- Explore- Practice Cycle* – practice reading the text and work on specific skills that you would like to focus on (projection, voice inflection, intonation, simple gestures, facial expression, emotion, etc.). This is called "meaningful reading."
- *Performance* – perform for an audience.

## **Implementing RT in a Required English Communication Course**

I wanted to find out if RT could be integrated successfully into a larger, required course. I have had success over the last few years integrating drama into a one-semester, required English communication course for first year students at Suzuka University of Medical Science (SUMS). The sub-theme of the course is presentation skills. Students typically make two or three speeches or presentations over the course of the semester.

In addition to basic English language skills, I generally spend a little time teaching voice inflection, gesture use, and voice projection. In order to reinforce these skills and boost student confidence, I usually do a drama project where students act out a short play called *Slow Food* in small groups of seven or eight students. The drama project usually takes about five full class periods to complete, which is a big chunk of time out of a fifteen-week course. I wanted to see if I could obtain the same positive results as the drama project by implementing an RT project that would hopefully take up less class time. After the RT project, I planned to have the students make a final, short speech. I planned to observe their speeches and then survey the students to try and gauge if students' use of basic presentation skills had improved and if their confidence had increased due to participation in the RT project.

In order to keep the theme of the RT project centered on nutrition, I decided to integrate an RT called *Snack Attack* (Bafile, 2008) into two classes of first-year students in the Nursing Department at SUMS. There were roughly 45 students in each class. *Snack Attack* is a story about two siblings, Fred and Virginia, who on their way to grab a snack in a supermarket, encounter some talkative produce that persuade them to choose fresh, healthy alternatives to potato chips and cookies. The twenty-some other characters in the play are all various fruits and vegetables that try and coax the children into choosing them as a snack. They do this by providing the kids with nutritional information and interesting trivia about themselves. Halfway through the story the fruits and vegetables get into an argument as to which is a healthier snack. There is a lot of lively debate among the characters in the second half of the play, which I thought would be fun for the students.

<b>Mom:</b>	Fred! Virginia! Find your snacks and meet me at checkout in five.
<b>Fred:</b>	Quick! Chips and cookies in aisle three!
<b>Virginia:</b>	I'll race you!
<b>Narrator:</b>	Virginia took a shortcut through produce, but soon was stopped in her tracks.
<b>Fred:</b>	Come on, Virginia!
<b>Virginia:</b>	Wait. I hear something.
<b>Fred:</b>	What is it?
<b>Salad Mix:</b>	(muffled) <i>Lettuce</i> out! <i>Lettuce</i> out! We're snacks, too!
<b>Fred:</b>	Who's that?
<b>Star Fruit:</b>	Just ignore them. The salad mix wants to go for a spin.
<b>Virginia:</b>	Who's talking?
<b>Fred:</b>	I think it's the produce.
<b>Star Fruit:</b>	They never give up! No one is going to buy a bag of leafy greens when a beautiful star fruit is available.
<b>Banana:</b>	That <i>carambola</i> is so self-centered. The banana is the most popular fruit in the United States. Americans eat an average of 28 pounds each per year, but you don't hear me <i>peeling</i> on and on, do you?
<b>Virginia:</b>	I <i>like</i> bananas, but we're looking for other snacks. Right, Fred?
<b>Potato:</b>	Enough with the fruit! Fred, how about the vegetables? Everybody loves a spud! Baked or mashed, we're packed with potassium.

Figure 1. Excerpt from the *Snack Attack* RT script (Bafile, 2008).

### Implementing the *Snack Attack* RT Project

First, I explained to the students what RT is and also told them the purpose of the project. We had done some class work on gesturing and voice inflection in previous classes. I told students that the purpose of the project was to practice using these skills, as well as to try to develop some confidence for the upcoming short speech that they would give in front of the class after the RT project was completed. I then gave the students the ready-made RT *Snack Attack* script. We did a class reading of the RT script and I explained some of the difficult vocabulary and modeled the

words that were difficult to pronounce. Roles were then assigned to students by having them draw playing cards. The card each student drew corresponded to a predetermined character in the script.

With roughly 45 students in a class, there were enough students to make two RT groups. After determining their roles and breaking into two groups, I had the students read the script one time at their desks in their groups with a focus on voice projection. In order to ensure that students comprehended their lines, I asked them to translate their lines into Japanese as a homework assignment to be completed by the next class. In addition to the translation, students were also tasked with adding simple gestures and voice inflection to their lines as part of the homework.

### **First Rehearsal**

In the next class period, we worked on staging for the final performance and had a rehearsal. In my mind, I had pictured having the students line up in multiple rows in the front of the classroom with the fruits on one side and the vegetables on the other. However, with the large number of characters in this RT script I found that it was difficult for these first-year students to group together like that and stay in focus for an extended period of time. The urge to talk with other students standing close by was too great for them. After failing with the initial grouping because of excess chatting and lack of student concentration, I had them line up in one long line that spread from the front of the room around to one side of the classroom. I also had them open up a little space between each fruit or vegetable group. Lining them up in this way eliminated some of the unwanted chatting and student focus improved. However, the students ended up being very spread out around the room.

Next, each group read and “walked through” the script two times. The first time, I emphasized voice projection, trying to make sure that student voices carried throughout the classroom. In addition to reading practice, we also had to figure out how Fred and Virginia would make their way along the line of fruits and vegetables. In traditional RT there is usually no physical movement around the stage and readers look at the audience, not at other performers. However, I felt that having Fred and Virginia moving and interacting somewhat with the other characters would help increase student comprehension of the RT script. There were also some

choral lines in the script, so in the first reading we also determined how we would handle the timing of the choral lines.

The second reading focused on adding gestures and voice inflection. Students had not done much preparation before class, so this did not go as well as I had hoped. After the second rehearsal, I asked them to prepare for the final performance the following week by doing expressive reading outside of class. I also asked them again to be sure to add voice inflection and gestures to their lines. In traditional RT, there are usually no costumes, and props are kept to a minimum. However, I thought it would help audience comprehension if students wore clothing that corresponded to the color of their fruit or vegetable for the performance, so I requested the students to wear clothing like that on final performance day.

### **Final Performance**

The final performance took place the following week. Only about half of the students prepared for their part by wearing some kind of clothing that corresponded to the color of their fruit or vegetable. To begin the performance, I had the students all group together in the front of the classroom. They did a very simple introduction. All the characters said, "Readers Theatre! Snack Attack!" at the same time and then walked quickly to their positions in line.

It became clear quite quickly who had prepared for the final performance and who had not. Students who had prepared had good voice projection, used simple gestures, and could read their parts smoothly. Students that hadn't prepared did not project their voices at all, had trouble with pronunciation, and could not read their parts without difficulty. Because there were two RT groups, one group served as the other group's audience during the performance. Students in both groups were able to read through to the end of the script without any major mistakes. The *Snack Attack* RT script concludes with a play-on-words type joke by one of the siblings. The students decided to finish the performance by having the entire cast laugh loudly at the joke. This signaled to the audience that the performance was over.



### **Teacher Observations of the *Snack Attack* RT**

The students seemed to enjoy collaborating with each other and performing together in their RT teams in the *Snack Attack* RT project. However, staging for the final performance was somewhat problematic. The students were spread out in a long line that wrapped around one side of the room. Because they were so spread out, the lively debate between the fruits and vegetables did not work well because the characters were too far apart. It would probably work better to have the fruits and vegetables closer together and somewhat facing each other to enhance the fruit versus vegetable conflict. In addition, because the characters were so far apart, it was difficult for the audience, as well as other performers in the skit, to hear the students who didn't project their voices well.

Shepard (2004) gives some general advice for character staging. He says characters should be arranged so they can face the audience as much as possible when speaking. Narrators, he advises, can be placed wherever, but they usually should stand in the front at either end of the stage. Shepard offers a practical method for discerning between which characters are "on stage" and which are "off stage." He says, in RT, that "off stage" characters should stay turned with their backs to the audience. In this way, Shepard says, it lets the audience know that the readers are out of the scene, even if they are still visible. When it's time to come back on stage, he suggests that they turn back around and move forward.

We were able to prepare and perform the RT in three class periods and I did not feel that students were overburdened with having to learn how to read too many lines. In total, each fruit and vegetable only had two or three short lines to read throughout the entire performance. However, these large groups of first-year students proved difficult to organize and keep on track. Even though the RT was somewhat successful, it might be better to do RT in smaller groups with fewer characters for easier classroom management.

There are over 20 characters in the *Snack Attack* RT script. That means performers had to wait a long time between lines to speak. The action picks up halfway through the story when the fruits and vegetables start arguing amongst themselves and the dialogue becomes snappy. When selecting an RT script Shepard (2004, p. 41) says that, "Almost any story can be scripted for reader's theater, but some are easier and work better than others. In general, look for stories that

are simple and lively, with lots of dialog or action, and with not too many scenes or characters." The action in *Snack Attack* is particularly slow in the first part of the story and this may have contributed to the lapse in concentration during rehearsal for these large groups of first-year students.

Although the student performance was far from perfect, overall I was actually pleased with the results, although more time probably needed to be dedicated to reading rehearsal. The better students in the class who had done a good job with preparation performed well. However, about half of the students did not project their voices and could not read their part smoothly. These were first-year students just in their third month of university in a required English course, so it would be unrealistic to expect all of them to perform flawlessly. Perhaps, part of one or two more class periods should have been spent on reading rehearsal with more gesture and voice inflection practice. Another idea would be to have students submit an audio file of their reading as a homework assignment before the final performance. In this way, the teacher could ensure that the students actually practiced reading their part for the final performance.

I explained what RT was to the students before implementing the project. However, it might have been a good idea to show them some video of an actual RT performance so that they could get a better feel for how they need to use their voice when reading their lines. Each of the two RT groups served as the other group's audience for the final performance. This worked out well, but to bolster student motivation a little more, inviting an outside audience to watch the final performance might have incited them to prepare more thoroughly.

The two siblings in the play, Fred and Virginia, have many more lines than other characters in the RT script. Two of the lower-level English speakers in the class ended up drawing the parts of Fred and Virginia. To ensure a smoother performance it might behoove the instructor to either ask for volunteers, or to assign more proficient English speakers to play these parts that require a higher English ability.

The introduction to the *Snack Attack* RT was very underwhelming. More thought needed to be put into it. The students just said, "Reader's theatre! Snack Attack!" in chorus and ran to their spot on stage and started the performance. Shepard (2004) says that a good beginning and ending

are crucial for an effective performance. He recommends giving a few words of greeting, introducing the group and saying a few words about what it's presenting and the purpose of the performance. Shepard also says that the intro can present a fact, an idea, an anecdote or even a question. After introducing the story, he suggests announcing the author and the title, and then having the readers wait to begin until all performers are in place and frozen and the audience is quiet.

The conclusion to the *Snack Attack* RT could have been better. The RT ended with the entire cast laughing at a play-on-words type joke. This indicated to the audience that the RT was over, but something seemed lacking. Shepard (2004) also provides some good advice on how to end an RT performance. As the story ends, he says that the last words should be spoken slowly and exaggerated so the audience realizes the story is over. After that, Shepard suggests that the readers should freeze for a few seconds and then close their scripts, face the audience, and bow all together. This is a simple technique that might be easy for students to implement.

### **Post-*Snack Attack* RT Student Speeches**

In the following two weeks after the *Snack Attack* RT, students prepared for their final presentation of the semester, a short speech where they introduced their hometowns. Students were required to use voice projection and to incorporate voice inflection and gestures into their presentations. In the last class of the semester, I divided the class into two groups. One student from each of the two groups gave a presentation simultaneously on opposite ends of the classroom to one half of the class. In this way, all forty-some presentations could be completed in one class period. I watched and graded one group of students on one end of the classroom, and had students videotape the other group on the other side of the room so that I could grade their speeches afterwards. I was pleasantly surprised with student use of the basic presentation skills in their speeches that we had worked on throughout the semester and in the RT project. The students also seemed to be more confident. However, I wanted to find out if that was true and also to get their feelings on the RT project. After they completed their speeches, I had them fill out a short, six-question Likert scale survey about the RT project.

### **Analysis of *Snack Attack* RT Student Survey Results**

The purpose of the *Snack Attack* RT project was to give students an opportunity to work on the basic presentation skills of voice projection, voice inflection, and gesture use that we had worked on in class. In addition, through the project, I hoped that by collaborating with other students as an RT team in a non-threatening environment, students would gain more confidence speaking English in front of an audience. As shown in Table 1, 98% of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed the *Snack Attack* RT project. The results of this question indicate that I was able to create an environment where students did not feel threatened in any way by the RT project. However, the RT project was not easy for all the students. 40% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the project was difficult for them. In spite of the project being somewhat difficult for many of the students, 75% of them agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to take part in another RT project.

As far as basic presentation skill development went, 93% of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the RT project helped them learn voice inflection. 72% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more comfortable using gestures after the *Snack Attack* RT. In regards to confidence gained for the final speech, 74% of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more confident for the final speech once they had completed the RT project. From this data it can be concluded that the *Snack Attack* RT project helped a majority of students develop and gain confidence in basic presentation skills that are necessary to make dynamic presentations. In addition, through participation in the RT project, speaking confidence increased for a greater part of the students. These results lead me to believe that RT has potential in EFL as an instrument that teachers can use to help students develop the confidence and skills needed to speak English with more expression.

Table 1

*Student Survey Results* (n = 88)

Statement	# who strongly agree	# who agree	# who partly agree	# who partly disagree	# who disagree	# who strongly disagree
I enjoyed the <i>Snack Attack</i> RT	61	25	1	0	1	0
The RT project helped me learn voice inflection	51	31	6	0	0	0
The RT project was difficult	13	22	28	0	16	9
I felt confident for the final speech after the RT	21	44	19	0	3	1
I felt more confident using gestures after the RT project	28	35	22	0	3	0
I would like to take part in another RT project	32	34	19	0	3	0

## Summary

As there is no need for students to memorize lines, RT is a non-threatening, fun, inclusive, and collaborative activity that can help students improve fluency, comprehension, and confidence. However, student interests probably need to be taken into account when choosing the RT script and repeated readings of the text in class, as well as ample rehearsal time are needed for students to benefit the most from RT. Teachers also need to utilize Taylor de Caballero's (2013) practice-explore-practice cycle to do "meaningful" reading and work on specific skills. The instructor also needs to make clear to students what is expected of them in the final performance. If possible, to maintain student motivation, RT should be performed in front of an out-of-class audience.

Although I felt that the *Snack Attack* RT project was successful and believe from this experiment that RT can be used effectively in large classes, classroom management and staging of the RT teams proved to be challenging. Choosing an RT script that has fewer characters and with lively dialogue throughout the entire script could help students stay on track and prevent lapses in concentration. With fewer characters, staging would also be less problematic as students could be

grouped closer together and all cast members could directly face the audience. Over the years I have observed that Japanese students feel comfortable in, and like to be part of, a team. RT is non-threatening and collaborative in nature. Much more research needs to be done on RT in large EFL classes, but I think RT shows promise as a method for helping Japanese students learn presentation skills and build the confidence needed to try and speak English more dynamically in front of others.

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