

Readers Theatre: Dramatising environment issues for oral skills development

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Abstract

Readers Theatre was introduced to a class of Japanese students studying intermediate-level English in an international university in Japan. The aim of the study is to investigate **whether Readers Theatre enhances the oral skills of Japanese students as they negotiate an environmental issue in English.** In my presentation, I will demonstrate how Readers Theatre is implemented in class and the comments by students will be analysed and discussed during the presentation.

Introduction to Readers Theatre

Readers Theatre (hereafter, RT) is an oral presentation of a story using scripts by two or more readers. Routman (1991:68) defines RT as “creating a script from a narrative text and performing it for an audience. Readers first read a story and then transform it into a script involving several characters. The script can then be performed with a minimum of preparation, props or scenery. Unlike traditional theater, RT emphasizes mainly on oral expression of the part. It involves learners in understanding their world, creating their own scripts, reading aloud, performing with a purpose, and bringing enjoyment to both themselves and their audiences. In general, there are five basic characteristics of RT:

- (a) There is selective and limited use of scenery and costumes
- (b) Voices, restrained gestures and facial expressions project the mood
- (c) A narrator usually describes the setting, action, character or mood
- (d) The reader uses a physical script
- (e) There is a close relationship between the performer and audience (Shanklin and Rhodes :1989).

RT is easy to implement in class because it does not require full costume, stage sets and memorisation of scripts. To implement RT in the classroom, readers first read a story, and then make selective and analytical choices in transforming the story into a script through social negotiation. The readers then formulate, practise and refine their interpretations, and finally perform for an audience, reading aloud from hand-held scripts.

Drama and oral language development

One of the main concerns in L2 acquisition is how to provide students with “real-life” language experience. Felton et al (1988) observe that drama provides opportunities to use language for a wider range of purposes than compared to language use in the traditional classroom. They 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. While the interactional talk focuses on people rather than things, expressive talk focuses on feeling and thinking. Needlands (1992) proposes 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 as he feels that involving students in the negotiation and construction of drama provides them with allows students to link the language they are learning with the world around them. Wilkinson (1988:12) suggests that experiential drama aid language development in the following ways:

greater use of language for a wide variety of purposes
more frequent opportunity for otherwise rarely used expressed language greater use of abstract thinking and language evolving from expressive language greater understanding of language as a powerful tool enabling its user to “act upon” rather than “be acted upon.”

Jordan and Harrell (2000:74) recognise RT as an effective drama activity for providing authentic speech practice especially in teaching reading fluency (rate, accuracy, phrasing, pitch, stress and expressiveness) as well as comprehension to emergent readers. 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.” Rosen and Koziol, Jr (1990) examined the relationship of drama activities to the improvement of oral communication skills, knowledge, comprehension, and attitudes. Their study showed that drama had a great influence on oral communication skills. Berlinger (2000:1) recognising the benefits of scripted dialogues in encouraging English expressions states that scripts have long been employed in ESL instruction because they permit students to actively acquire the vocabulary, idioms, grammar and syntax of English speech. As they involve all aspects of language, scripts that are rehearsed in class can offer students a dynamic encounter that comes closest to real communication. However, Kao (1994) identifies three common negative attitudes towards drama in the L2 classroom:

- (a) Drama activities as “party time” or “easy-pass course”
- (b) Students’ sceptical view and distrust of drama
- (c) Students with low self-esteem or poor language proficiency levels became discouraged by their active and confident peers in their struggle to learn.

Wagner (1998) states that although drama has been instrumental in expanding the range of registers and styles among language students, new studies are necessary to describe more fully the structure of drama teaching to determine which teacher strategies and interactions are critical to oral language development. The objective of this study is to investigate whether RT improve the oral skills of Japanese students as they negotiate environmental issues in English.

The Study

RT was introduced to EFL Japanese students studying Intermediate English in an international university in Japan. In Intermediate English 1, students study how English is used to communicate ideas about various global issues. The course content is organized around a broad global issues theme focusing on environmental issues. The class consisted of twenty around the ages of 18-20. The average TOEFL score of students is about 450.

Reasons for using RT in the classroom

Japanese EFL learners generally experienced difficulty in reading and understanding the prescribed environmental reading passages. There were too many new words for them to handle. As a result, many learners could not appreciate the topics in the reading passages. Students also felt that the text did not allow them much opportunity to practise their spoken English in class. The attention to details and analysis of word usage gradually led students to become slow, passive and dictionary dependent learners. RT was introduced to motivate EFL learners to appreciate expository text as well as generating interest in discussing environmental issues.

Implementation of RT in class

A reading passage on the Kyoto Protocol (see appendix) was first given to students. Vocabulary was pre-taught. After that, students read the passage individually and discussed their responses to the topic. After students had gained sufficient background knowledge of the topic, they were put in various groups of three or four. They were then given the task of writing a script on the topic, guided by a problem-based scenario:

Problem Scenario

Kyoto is well known for its historical sites and cultural centers in Japan. However, the city council wants to ‘modernise’ the city but needs to develop a new environmentally friendly power station. There are several groups in Kyoto (city council, developers, residents, environmentalist, entrepreneurs, historical society and farmers) which may agree or disagree with the plan to build a power station. Suppose you belong to one of the groups. How would your voice your arguments to support or oppose the plan?

Students were told to write a script (at least 1 page and involve at least 4 groups) to portray the different groups and show the main arguments and all possible responses to the construction of the power station: *city council, developers, residents, environmentalist, entrepreneurs, historical society and farmer*. Students were told that they should follow the problem scenario for writing the script. After students had finished writing the scripts, they read and rehearsed their roles. When they were ready to perform their scripts, teacher recorded their performance in a tape recorder. (Note : The

implementation of the RT activity requires two to three teaching periods depending on the language proficiency of students.)

Data Collection

In an attempt to investigate whether RT improves the oral skills of Japanese students as they negotiate environmental issues in English, data were collected from a questionnaire survey of learners' reaction towards the use of RT. The survey questions were designed to explicitly elicit students' opinion and comments on the use of RT.

Results

The results of the survey showed that a majority of students in the class enjoyed the RT activity and commented positively about their experiences:

Student 1

I enjoyed his activity because speaking English is so interesting for me. But sometimes it is difficult for me to express my ideas in English. So I need a lot of times to practice speaking English. That is why this activity is important for me.

Student 2

I enjoyed this activity because I could write the script by myself and also act. I think its good for us to improve our English skills like writing or speaking. We have to practice the pronunciation more, so this activity is good. If I have an opportunity to try this activity again, I want to speak more clearly. I had a very good time.

Student 3

This activity was very interesting for me because I could understand what my friend thinks about the environment. We became more friendly to each other after the lesson. I think English class should be like this. I want to use English to communicate with my friends from now.

Student 4

I find it difficult to speak about environmental issues because it is difficult for me to use English in my daily conversation. I want to improve my speaking skills!

However, several students maintained a sceptical view and distrust of drama (Kao:1994). Two or three students feel that the activity is good but acting out the script was not interesting as they feel that everybody merely read the script. They would prefer to perform without reading the script. In addition, students with lower language proficiency levels tend to be passive during the negotiation of scripts.

Discussion

On the whole, RT is able to develop the Japanese students' spoken English as they engage in negotiation of environmental issues in class. Students are keen to use English as they work on the scripts based on the environmental problem scenario. A great deal of spoken English on the environmental discussion was generated as students make multiple negotiations to decide what lines to keep, where to edit and revise, and how lines should be said to show the main arguments and all possible responses to the construction of the power station. As students negotiate their script, they engage in different language use functions such as asking and answering questions, solving problems, expressing their opinions, arguing, persuading (Kao, 1994). They also learn to experiment with vocabulary, register and speech patterns as they take on different roles (Wager, 1998). As a result, they gain tremendous confidence in using spoken English. In the process of script negotiation, students are also challenged to use language in new and creative ways. As students collaborate to produce a script, they also take ownership of their own learning and are intrinsically involved in developing dialogue to ensure that a script is produced. RT provides richness and energy in the classroom because students are experientially involved in performing a piece of literature on an environment issue. Through dramatising the environmental issue, students realise that the same environmental problems and situations could also happen in their hometown or country. As a result, they become engaged and develop a sense of investment in the lesson because they are not only merely performing an academic assignment but also engage in problem-solving tasks that could surface in real life. It is also energising

for the teacher as they watch students read, interpret and perform the problem scenario, knowing that students are holistically involved in the process of learning environmental issues.

Observation by Teacher

Although several students were not active during the script negotiation, in general, RT generated students' interests in appreciating text on environmental issues. Previously, a majority of students were not able to discuss environmental issues in English due to insufficient vocabulary and a lack of background information on environmental issues. But through RT, students were able to explore roles, ideas and situations pertaining to environmental issues. They learn to manipulate language in order to activate prior knowledge on environmental issues. Through the script negotiations, individual student could express freely their views and opinions on the construction of the power station, and this further allows other group members to share their ideas and attitudes on the topic. The negotiation of meaning pushes students to practise the target language as much as possible. In addition, students' vocabulary on environmental issues was reinforced through the negotiations of script (Kao:1994). A lot of discussions were observed in class as students were keen to express their views on the pros and cons of building a power station in Kyoto. The class became more energised as students voiced their opinions on the various problems that could result from the construction of the power station in Kyoto.

Conclusion

Except for several students, a majority of students have positive response in using RT to discuss issues on the environment. At the same time, RT also helps them to experience the satisfaction of writing to share ideas with interested readers on environmental problems and issues. However, there can be limitations to using RT in class, particularly if students have no familiarity with theatre as a genre, or they may not have the linguistically ability to produce their own scripts. In the case of Japanese EFL learners, who have just been immersed in a totally English-speaking environment, getting them to write scripts was a rather tedious task. The teacher has to proofread and edit their scripts several times before they were ready to perform. Some degree of initial inhibition and resistance to acting was encountered. However, despite these limitations, RT has the potential to become an innovative teaching approach to motivate intermediate and advanced Japanese EFL learners to discuss environmental issues in English.

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APPENDIX: **Japan and The Kyoto Protocol (in-class reading)**

1 The Kyoto Protocol is now a part of the United Nations Framework
2 Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and is intended to cut global
3 emissions of greenhouse gases. When Japan played host to the signing of the
4 Kyoto Accord in 1997, the symbolism seemed apt since Japanese people saw
5 themselves as global environmental leaders.

6 Eight years later, however, Japan is finding it difficult to comply with the
7 greenhouse-gas limits of the Kyoto Protocol. As the treaty took effect in
8 2005, the hosts found themselves in the same internal battles that have
9 affected other countries on the Kyoto issue: disputes over taxes, spending,
10 government rules and corporate behaviour. As the homeland of the Kyoto
11 Accord, Japan was expected to become a model for other countries,
12 environmentalists say. Instead, its greenhouse-gas emissions have increased
13 greatly in recent years.

14 Rather than placing tough limits on its domestic industries, Japan is planning
15 to meet its Kyoto obligations with more practical steps, including the
16 purchase of emission credits from China or Russia. Under the Kyoto Accord,
17 Japan pledged that by 2012, it would reduce its greenhouse-gas emissions to
18 6 percent below its 1990 level. However, the latest government reports show
19 Japan's emissions were already 8 percent above the 1990 level in 2003, and
20 forecasts suggest that the country will not come close to achieving its 2012
21 goals.

22 In response, the government has been forced to revise its official plan. The
23 latest effort -- expected to be approved by Japan's cabinet in May 2005 --
24 seeks to meet its Kyoto pledge with a combination of emission cuts, new
25 forests and the purchase of emission credits.

26 "We're very disappointed by the plan," said Yurika Ayukawa, climate-change
27 officer at the Japan office of World Wildlife Fund. "At least 1.6 percent of
28 the reduction, and maybe more, will be bought from credits from the carbon
29 market. This means that the government already admits its failure to meet the
30 Kyoto target with domestic reductions. They don't want to introduce any new
31 policies to bring Japan's emissions to a downward trend. This is a failure of
32 domestic climate policy and we're very regretful about it."
33

34 Another Japanese environmentalist, Mie Asaoko, was in the conference room
35 in Kyoto in 1997 when the Accord was signed, and she remembers the
36 excitement in the room. "I thought it was a historic moment," she said. "But
37 we've made less progress than I expected. If we can't meet our 2012 target, it
38 will be a disgrace. It will be a failure for Japan and for the Kyoto Accord,
39 and it will affect the whole world. Japan should be an international leader."
40

Reading retrieved and adapted by L. Guishard from <http://www.ccchina.gov.cn/english/source/ab/ab2005042904.htm>
(Word Count: 434)