

Readers Theatre from Theory to Practice: Benefits and Challenges

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Abstract

Often used in lower level classrooms and especially with young children, readers theatre has been found to have a positive impact on the development of children's oral reading proficiency and fluency. In readers theatre, the participant's aim is to read a text aloud in an effective manner so that the action is visualized by readers and viewers vividly and expressively. Although readers theatre has many educational benefits such as increasing students' reading and speaking proficiency, motivating them to improve their language and interpersonal skills, and increasing an interest in cooperating and meaning-making, it has many challenges such as those associated with students' psychological conditions. In this paper, following a brief review of the literature on readers theatre, classroom procedures are discussed by focusing on the benefits and challenges of readers theatre.

Keywords: Readers Theatre from Theory to Practice: Benefits and Challenges

Introduction

Drama has been used in the classroom as a tool for promoting active learning since the progressive era of the 1920s and was more recently revived in the 1980s and 1990s with the introduction of Howard Gardner's theories of multiple intelligences (1993). The integration of dramatic-arts activities such as Readers Theater in the classroom has been found to support every aspect of students' literacy development and offers new ways for students to engage with the text in meaningful ways (McMaster, 1998).

As argued by Allington and Walmsley (1995), those who have reading problems need more opportunities engage with text. That is to say, those who cannot read successfully should read different texts in differing ways. Among many applications suggested and put into practice to minimize the negative consequences of traditional classroom reading practices, readers theater (RT) integrates drama with reading and writing lessons in which "a story text is converted to a script" (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008, p. 338).

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Often used in lower level classrooms and especially with young children, RT has been found to have a positive impact on the development of children's oral reading proficiency and fluency. In RT, the participant's aim is to read a text aloud in an effective manner so that the action is visualized by readers and viewers vividly and expressively. While it is a theatrical form, the students do not engage in physical actions associated with the script and are often seated while reading. In this paper, following a brief review of the literature on RT, classroom procedures are discussed by focusing on the benefits and challenges of RT applications.

RT: Benefits and Challenges

RT has many educational benefits such as increasing students' reading and speaking proficiency, motivating them to improve their language and interpersonal skills, and increasing an interest in cooperating and meaning-making. RT helps "the development of literacy skills" (Moran, 2006, p. 318). Furthermore, RT may promote vocabulary acquisition by offering repeated exposures to words (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008, p. 340).

"The RT activity clearly motivated even the reluctant readers and helped engage all the children in the literature" (Moran, 2006, p. 319). RT appears to have nurtured students' motivation to practice oral reading and may have fostered feelings of success as a reader via the public performances (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008, p. 355). For both emergent readers and older students, RT can help to increase students' self-esteem and confidence. RT has many challenges such as those associated with students' psychological conditions among which shyness is the leading one. Teachers must be willing to encourage introverted students and also challenge those students who may be more gifted in the dramatic arts.

Teachers who are new to RT applications may find the processes tiring because they must plan carefully and observe students' work closely. Readers Theatre experiences are more time consuming for teachers and students when they are more structured, with students choosing their favorite story or pages, engaging in scriptwriting and sharing their efforts with an audience. They can also take the form of more spontaneous informal improvisations, such as students taking turns retelling a story which takes less time and effort (Buehl, 2001).

Moran (2006) states that while employing RT, teachers should

1. choose developmentally appropriate texts
2. determine the dramatic experience level of the children
3. model expressive reading
4. make practice a priority
5. involve families
6. perform for an audience
7. be persistent (pp. 320-322).

Hence, the teachers' role is of great importance in RT. As cited in Keehn, Harmon, and Shoho (2008):

While students practice reading in repertory groups, the teacher actively listens to the oral reading and coaches students in expressiveness and phrasing. This feedback is important to students' fluency growth. Pany and McCoy (1998) found that repeated reading with feedback and guidance was superior to repeated reading alone. (p. 339)

RT is closely associated with increasing students' fluency. As suggested by Rinehart (1999), "It makes theoretical sense that repeated reading of familiar material might result in fluency gains" (p. 72). Rinehart (1999) concluded that students who participated elementary classrooms in which RT was employed "were excited about reading their scripts because they could and because someone wanted to listen" (p. 87). Review of the relevant research on RT by Tsou (2011, p. 731) showed that "a successful performance leads to increased self-confidence and boosts interest in reading (Rizopoulos, 2004), and the related sense of confidence can lead to a noticeable rise in learners' language fluency and motivation (Clark, 2006; Worthy & Broadus, 2001; Worthy & Prater, 2002)."

Procedures

Conceptualizing poetry as a performative process is at the heart of RT. Forms of drama such as RT, choral readings and explorations of poetry offer opportunities for students to enhance oral language and listening skills. Young and Nageldinger (2010) cites Jorge Luis Borges who rightly put "Truly fine poetry must be read aloud. A good poem does not allow itself to be read in a low voice or silently. If we can read it silently, it is not a valid poem: a poem demands pronunciation. Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art." (1972, p. 9). We whole-heartedly believe these words, and concur that poetry is meant to be performed (p. 51). Hence, through applications of RT during which poetry is treated as a performative and real-life act, the sound of poetry will have a lasting influence on readers/performers.

Apart from teachers' involvement, students are considered to have an active role when it comes to participating directly in the process. Richards and Goldberg (2003) outline practical applications for linking dramatic activities like Reader's Theater to literacy lessons. Teachers must consider ways to challenge and engage students who may not wish to perform for an audience; consider other student strengths, roles and responsibilities. They must also consider ways to encourage and include students from diverse cultures to use their individual experiences, heritages, interests, and strengths in developing lessons that maximize literacy learning and social interactions (p.98).

The process of employing RT with students can be summarized, in Clark, Morrison and Wilcox' (2009) words, as follows:

Students create the drama through their voices as they expressively read their parts without acting, changing positions on a stage, or using props. Students are given the script several days in advance and provided time to read and reread their assigned parts prior to a final performance. (p. 360)

Conclusion

RT is a staged reading of a play or dramatic piece of work designed to entertain, inform or influence (Moran, 2006, p. 317). The performance is highly stylized, meaning that actions are implied rather than performed. For example, an actor may turn her back to the audience to indicate that her character has left the stage or use her hand to pantomime knocking on a door (Moran, 2006), p. 317-318). Costumes, scenery, and props are rarely used but may be suggested by an accessory such as a crown or sign (Moran, 2006), p. 317-318). The entire process is a jointly interpretive act for both readers and the audience (Moran, 2006, p. 318).

In short, as Clementi (2010) concludes, RT “is a fun, motivational way for students to improve their fluency, thereby increasing their comprehension and overall reading ability. Instead of boring students by rereading books, passages, and poems, RT allows students to improve their fluency constantly as they reread in anticipation of performing” (no page).

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