

Conference Paper

Developing Student's Oral and Reading Skills Through Reader's Theatre

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Abstract

The ability to speak well in English has always been a challenging task among students from the rural areas. There are various types of materials that have been developed to improve student's fluency to speak English, and Reader's Theatre (RT) is one of them. A study was conducted using Readers Theatre to help students improve their oral and reading skills in English in a stress free workshop. The workshop was a combination of language and arts activities that combined language skills of speaking and reading to improve students' performance. The workshop was conducted among students over a period of three weeks. A survey was carried out on the student's perceived learning experience to speak and read English whilst taking part in Reader's Theatre. The findings of the study show that Reader's Theatre was a good tool to boost high school students' motivation to speak clearly and confidently in English when they collaborated and interacted with their peers. However, it was not the aim of the present study to check if students spoke or read more English materials outside classroom as a result of Reader's Theatre workshop.

Keywords: Reader's Theatre, reading skill, speaking skill, fluency.

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1. Introduction

The ability to speak well in English has always been a thorny issue among many high school students especially among students from the semi urban and rural areas. The ability to speak with others to convey opinions and share ideas is an important skill that needs to be mastered from early stages of school life. However, it has been noted that high school students' ability to speak English is not encouraging in Malaysia (Hassan & Selamat, 2017). We often hear complaints on how school leavers and college graduates are unable to speak English well during interviews, and often falter in their ability to perform well at workplace because of their inability to communicate well in English (Arukesamy, 2015; Moreton, 2017). Becoming proficient in speaking English is imperative for students as it enables them to deliver opinions and express ideas better while in school and later on at workplace. There are resources which can be exploited to encourage students to improve their reading and speaking skills that enhances their

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fluency in English, and Reader's Theatre (RT) is one of them. Research has revealed that RT helps even struggling speakers to speak English (Mraz et al., 2013; Young & Nageldinger, 2014) as a fun way to encourage learners to speak on exciting and interesting topics (Shanthi, Zainon, & Thayalan, 2018; Yildirim & Rasinski, 2014)

2. Literature Review

In Malaysian schools, English is taught as a second language. Students are taught listening, speaking, reading and writing skills so that they would be able to communicate with others in English for ordinary day-to-day needs, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace requirements (Ministry of Education, 2011).

An increased focus on mastery of English among Malaysian students arose after Malaysia was placed at a dismal 52th place, whereas our neighbouring country Singapore was positioned first on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Jackson & Kiersz, 2016). PISA is administered every three years worldwide to measure the performance in mathematics, science and reading in English for fifteen-year-old students from 72 countries worldwide.

Another factor that increased focus on English mastery among students is the fact highlighted by studies that showed that the rise in unemployment rate among university graduates is often blamed on their lack of English proficiency and sloppy communication skills (Su-Hie, et.al. 2017; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014).

Lack of English fluency affects the employability of our students and the image of our educational system. Therefore, measures need to be taken to increase English language fluency among students. This is where RT as a teaching and learning tool can step in. The specific RT program designed by the researchers can benefit students to develop their speaking skills and reading fluency.

2.1. Problem statement and the aim of the present study

Fluency in communication or speaking skill is often neglected over to writing and reading skills among second language learners (Yates, 2017; Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018). Yates (2017) also reported that teachers almost certainly prefer teaching the easier language skills which are reading and writing instead of listening and speaking. A study conducted by Shanthi et al. (2018), has shown that students want teachers to conduct attractive and exciting activities rather than just the mundane chalk and talk method, using textbooks and photocopied worksheets. A student interviewed in the same

study stated that “Teachers should be resourceful and come up with more interesting classroom and outside classroom activities (English Club activities)”. Venturing from that, the current study aims to investigate students’ perception on the effects of Reader’ Theatre (RT) on their speaking and reading ability from among high school students in a semi urban school. Thus, the main objective of the study is to investigate student’s perception on the effectiveness of using RT to motivate them to speak and read in English. The research questions of this study are:

1. What factors impedes students from speaking in English in classrooms?
2. Does Reader’s Theatre provide a positive English learning experience to student?

The limitation of the study is that it focuses on Form 3 students from two high schools in a semi urban area. Therefore, the information obtained from this study cannot be generalized to represent all the students throughout Malaysia. Neither can it be used to assume that learners of other schools in this country will have similar perceptions of using RT to enhance their fluency in English. Nevertheless, the benefits and implication of this study can be adopted in other similar contexts.

2.2. The nature of reader’s theatre

Research has shown that in a conversation words only carries 7% of the message, tone of voice conveys 38% of the message, together words and tone of voice carries only 45% of the intended message in a conversation, while an overwhelming 55% of the message is conveyed by body language (Mehrabian, 2007). Therefore, for effective communication students need to be taught not only what they say, but how well to say it by using a blend of verbal and non-verbal communicative skills. All of these skills are covered when RT is used in classrooms. RT is a simple form of theatrical presentation that can be used for academic purpose that stresses on the use of voice projection, correct pronunciation, intonation and expression to present meaning of a read text. Even weak students can partake in RT as it does not require the participants to memorise scripts for performance nor does it require any props, and special costumes.

During the RT activity students are trained to depict a story and characters through appropriate facial expressions, good pronunciation and voice projection to give the right impact to the messages they are sending to the audience. In short, RT encourages students to use their creative imaginations and polish their presentation skills while motivating them to achieve the targeted language skills of reading and speaking English (Shanthi et al., 2018; Qannubi, Gabarre, & Mirza, 2018). The flexibility of Readers Theatre

is such that students of a wide range of age, group and levels of proficiency can benefit from and enjoy RT (Karabag, 2015). According to some studies, RT is an effective technique to help students improve their English speaking skills (Ng & Yip, 2010; Shanthi et al., 2018). In a result of another study conducted on a smaller number of students (42 students) by Shanthi et al., (2018), showed that Reader's Theatre can increase student's confidence to speak because RT:

1. makes students happy and relax when speaking,
2. increases interaction among students as they work together as a group,
3. improves pronunciation of words through repeated reading and rehearsals,
4. motivates students to speak properly and correctly, and
5. makes students become more confident speaking in front of an audience

RT also encourages repeated reading of the text so that students can have a deeper meaning of the events and characters in the text for them to "role play" at their best at the performance stage. Various researches have shown that repeated reading, improves reading comprehension (Elhoweris, 2017; Young, Mohr & Rasinski, 2015). During repeated reading students are given opportunities to interact with group members to explore on of the content of the story, discover meaning and proper pronunciation of words in context.

Also, during RT activity students explore the assigned script by rewriting certain parts of the text to suit the group and assign characters to group members accordingly. They also read the text repeatedly with full use of the vocal ability and facial expression to give life to the story and presentation. According to Arafah (2018), such personal and repeated interaction with a text can lead to personal involvement, which is very useful to help learners to stay focus and increase concentration on speaking, writing, listening, and reading. He further concludes that; the whole process can have a very positive effect on the development language and language learning (Qannubi et al., 2018).

Therefore, recognising the usefulness of RT at getting students to speak and read in English, the aim of this paper is to report the findings of the RT module that was carried out in two high schools in a semi urban area. The RT module developed by the researchers comprises of carefully selected materials and a series of activities such as physical warm-up, correct breathing techniques, facial muscle exercise, pronunciation exercise and activities to project the various human emotions. These step-by-step activities not only boost the speaking skills but also the development of interest in

reading but also creative presentation that can guide students from being reluctant speakers into an eager one. Finally, the students were given different scripts to explore on the test before they performed for the audience.

3. Research Method

3.1. Introduction

The study is an action research carried out after the implementation of an English activity focused on Reader's Theatre for promoting speaking and reading skills among high school students. The RT workshop was carried out over a period of 3 weeks. The students were taught the right breathing technique, voice projection, facial expression to express different emotions, correct pronunciation of words, and discovering the meaning of new words. The students were divided into groups of five or six to explore the scripts. During this stage the facilitators of the workshop got the students to read the scripts repeatedly to familiarise the students with the RT text. Then, the students were left to work on their own to explore the characters and other elements of the story in preparation for their presentation. After the introductory session and the distribution of the scripts, the pupils spent a large part of the next two weeks practicing the scripts at school, plus practicing at home, preparing for the oral presentation of the texts. Lastly, students performed the script in front of an audience. The researchers kept a list of observatory behaviours from the first to the third week of RT implementation.

3.2. Instruments

The students were asked to complete a questionnaire that checked on their English learning experience and their perception of using RT to encourage them to acquire English. While four teachers were asked to write answers to 5 semi structured interview questions. The questionnaire was administered on the third week after the students' RT presentation. Two types of data were used for this study;

1. questionnaire for students.
2. observation during the preparation and presentation stage of RT.

3.3. Participants

The participants of this research are 98 high school students from two schools from a semi urban area and their English language teachers. These students were selected because they had covered all the necessary language skills -1601072918-1601072918of the English syllabus for the year of schooling and they had been assessed on all the four language skills. Hence, the teachers who answered the structured interview questions were able to make comparison on their students' speaking skills while in class and during the RT workshop and their performance.

3.4. Implementation of the RT workshop

The implementation of RT activities was as follows:

1. practicing drama techniques (vocal training and facial experience using video).
2. teaching basic pronunciation and teaching them to use online dictionaries.
3. rehearsing RT scripts with students.
4. getting students to perform the script in groups.
5. performing to an audience.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Student's perception

The data from the questionnaire answered by the participants were analysed to retrieve information on the effectiveness of RT module developed to get students speak and read in English. The questions aimed to retrieve information to answer the two research questions to the study:

1. What factors impedes students from speaking in English in classrooms?
2. Does Reader's Theatre provide a positive English learning experience to student?

The data were analysed for frequency distribution (n) and in percentages (%). The first two questions in the questionnaire gave a general perception of student's interest to use English before and after the RT workshop. This can be seen in Table 1.

1. How do you rate your interest to use English BEFORE Reader's Theatre workshop?

2. How do you rate your interest to use English AFTER Reader’s Theatre workshop?

TABLE 1: Students’ Responses On Their Interest to Use English.

Scale	No. response (n)	Before (%)	No. response (n)	After (%)
1	3	2.9	0	0
2	29	28.4	2	1.0
3	42	42.9	13	13.3
4	17	17.3	57	58.2
5	7	7.1	26	26.5
Total	98	100	98	100

From the scale of 1 being very weak to 5 meaning very good, the results shown in Table 1 indicates that 84.7% of the students rated their interests at a scale of 4 and 5 after undergoing Reader’s Theatre activities as compared to 24.4% of the students before the RT workshop. It is also noted that 42.9% of these students were unsure of their interest in English before engaging in Reader’s Theatre activities.

On the questions, “What factors impedes you from speaking English in the classroom?” Participants were asked to pick any two variables from a given list. Participant’s response to the questions is tabulated in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Student’s Inhibition to Speak English.

Item	No. response (n)	Percentage (%)
Fear of losing face	21	10.7
Worried about making mistakes	21	10.7
Fear of criticism	4	2.0
Not necessary to use English to communicate with others	33	16.8
Lack of vocabulary	38	19.4
Anxiety	36	18.4
Lack support from friends	13	6.6
Free use of mother-tongue or other languages during English lesson.	27	13.8
I do not know	1	0.5
Total	196	100

The results indicate a variety of factors that inhibits the students’ from speaking English. The major contributing factors seem to be related to “lack of vocabulary (19.4%)” and “anxiety (18.4%)” which adds up to 55%. and “not necessary to use English to communicate with others” (37.8%)”. When students find it was not necessary to use English during lessons as indicated by 16.8% of the students, they lack motivation and drive to use the language. Also the fact that mother-tongue or other languages (13.8%)

was allowed to be used during English lessons does not encourage students to speak English.

Another fact that can be derived from the findings is elements of “fear of losing face (10.7%)”, and “worried about making mistakes (10.7%)” which denotes lack of confidence added to up 21.4%. Student’s lack of confidence in using the language is linked to poor proficiency in the various language skills which causes them to fear losing face or making mistakes when using the language. This result of the findings echoes a study conducted by Andi and Arafah (2017), that showed that students were least confident in oral communication skill because of poor vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar skills.

The central focus of the questionnaire was to ascertain whether RT provided a positive English learning experience to the students, and this was reflected in the second research question: Does Reader’s Theatre provide a positive English learning experience to you? Students responds to the questions is tabulated in Table 3.

TABLE 3: RT and Student’s English Learning Experience.

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1. RT is interesting	0.0%	7.1%	3.1%	20.6%	69.2%
2. RT is difficult	64.3%	35.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
3. RT encourages me to speak English.	0.0%	4.1%	7.1%	38.8%	50.0%
4. RT improves my pronunciation.	0.0%	0.0%	5.1%	18.4%	76.5%
5. RT encourages me to read English	0.0%	5.1%	4.1%	62.2%	28.6%
6. RT helps to increase my vocabulary.	1.0%	8.2%	8.2%	40.1%	41.8%
7. RT is a fun way to improve my fluency in English	0.0%	2.0%	1.0%	23.5%	73.5%
8 RT motivates me to speak English	0.0%	8.2%	12.2%	40.8%	38.8%
9. Working in RT group helps me to learn English better	4.1%	4.1%	3.1%	61.2%	26.5%
10. I prefer to learn English alone than in a group.	26.5%	53.1%	10.2%	6.1%	4.1%
11. RT made no difference in the way I learn English	60.0%	32.7%	1.0%	4.1%	2.0%
12. RT encourages me to be more confident to speak English	9.2%	10.2%	4.1%	37.8%	38.7%

1 (strongly disagree); 2 (disagree); 3 (not sure); 4 (agree); 5 (strongly agree)

As seen in Table 3, the highest percentage (76.5%) of students claimed that RT helped them to improve their pronunciation. In their responses a majority of students (69.2%) strongly agreed that RT is an interesting activity. Cumulatively (agreed and strongly agreed) the majority of the respondents said that RT encouraged them to speak (88.8%) and read (90.8%) better in English. In a related question, 76% of the students (agree - 37.8%, and strongly agree - 38.7%) claimed they were more confident using English through RT activities. This result of the findings is similar to a study by Augustin,

Vianty, and Zuraida (2015) that RT was an enjoyable project that helped students gain confidence in using some of the basic presentation skills necessary to speak English.

The questionnaire also showed that students liked working collaboratively. The results show 61.2% of the respondents agreed that they enjoyed working with friends to perform in front of an audience. To sum-up, an overwhelming 73.5% of them strongly agreed that RT was a fun way to improve English fluency. This finding is similar to a study conducted by Supriya, (2018) who used play scripts to increase language fluency. The study showed that using play scripts entailed to social interaction and negotiation of meaning among heterogeneous group members in which they have to help each other, and that brought about positive impact to the learning process.

The results of the study also indicate that RT was also perceived as a positive learning experience because it proved to be a better English language learning approach as students admitted that they learnt English better because RT was fun (73.5% strongly agree) that enabled them to learn new vocabulary (agreed 40.1% and strongly agreed 41.8%), and pronounce words better (76.5% strongly agree). When these is compared to the findings reported on Table 2, where students stated that their lack of vocabulary was the highest factor that impedes their ability to speak English, then RT is a good activity to help students build their confidence to speak English.

4.2. Observation

As part of the study, the researchers observed the students during the preparation and presentation stage of RT. It was observed that the students had learned to experiment with their voices by varying their pitch and volume to portray the character they played in the story. Students also paid more attention to their pronunciation of words, especially when they were rehearsing their scripts, and even more so when they knew that they had to act out the scripts to an audience. Students also learned to deliver smoother speech, with little pauses or groping for words as they were taught the right method to hold their scripts as they performed to the audience. Also, repetitive reading of the script and rehearsals increased comprehension of the text. At certain point it was observed that students came up with phrases and sentences that were not from the script during the presentation, but that fitted the flow of the story perfectly. As students rehearsed their scripts, they also learnt to use tone to portray the attitude and emotion of the characters. In addition, RT also built the confidence of the students to handle spoken dialogue. In addition, as indicted by Mac Rae (1985), if one group of students presents

a scene to a group of people, the stresses and intonations used can be picked up and evaluated by the 'audience' who are their fellow students.

5. Conclusion

The RT module appears to hold positive English speaking and reading experiences and develop students' ability to use English in fun ways. RT workshop has helped students to believe that English is not a difficult language to learn. RT encourages students to speak-1601072914-1601072914 English and helped them to overcome their fear of making mistakes. RT supports students to use online dictionary which not only gives meanings of words, but also correct pronunciation that helps them to become independent learners. As a consequence, they enriched their bank of vocabulary, learnt to speak with clarity and overcome their fear to speak in front of an audience. Also RT has encouraged learners to collaborate and compromise when they worked in groups. Thus, teaching the importance of teamwork which is crucial for workplace. In conclusion, it can be said that RT has positive impact in improving learners' fluency in English especially in oral and reading skills

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