**A Study on Teaching Readers Theatre**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of my participation in the Readers Theatre Workshop in London 2008 was twofold: to discern the value of the learning process of Readers Theatre by actually getting involved as a learner, and to confirm that Readers Theatre techniques have a beneficial effect on teaching English to speakers of Japanese studying in junior college in Japan. Although it is of great use in teaching English to Japanese junior college students, the application of Readers Theatre techniques should be introduced within the framework of Japanese educational settings where almost all of the directors, performers, and audience consist of Japanese speakers who study or have studied English as a foreign language. The benefits of comprehension, cooperation, and responsibility should be taken into consideration more when Readers Theatre is taught in classroom settings in Japan.

**1-1 Introduction**

My interest in the possibility of applying Oral Interpretation (hereafter, OI) or Readers Theatre (hereafter, RT) techniques to teaching my students in Japan started when I saw some of them shed tears in front of me after performing at one of the bi-annual OI Festivals sponsored by Nanzan Junior College, Nagoya, Japan (hereafter, the College). It was hard for me, though, to imagine that the students had begun crying spontaneously after their presentations, since I had had no experience of performing RT myself at all before I joined the College faculty in 2004. I was intensely curious about what made them get carried away and cry, rather than appreciating their literary works, and began to wonder, at the same time, if I could
actually get exposed to RT as a participating reader, not as audience. Meanwhile, Professor Emeritus Yoshiko Tanaka at the College, one of the leading practitioners of RT in Japan, introduced us to the annual RT Workshop after she participated in it.

1–2 Purpose of the paper

This paper has two purposes. One is to describe my own experiences during the RT Workshop that I participated in through the Flatten Fund provided by the College. The other purpose is to attempt to explore the ways of applying RT techniques to teaching English to Japanese students at the College.

1–3 Facts about the RT Workshop

The RT Workshop was sponsored by the Institute for Readers Theatre (hereafter, IRT), San Diego, CA, and co-sponsored by the University of Southern Maine, Gorham, ME. There were 21 participants and 12 faculty and staff members from the United States and Japan. All of the official instruction scheduled for the RT Workshop was conducted at the Hampstead Britannia Hotel, Primrose Hill Road, London. The basic schedule from Monday through Friday was as follows: 8:00–9:15 Announcements and Interpretation, 9:15–10:00 Assembly, 10:00 Break, and 10:30–13:30 Double Session between Basic Scriptmaking Class and Advanced Class, with some changes depending on the day. The roll call was carefully done each time the session met since the RT Workshop also provided the participants who wished up to 12 credits from the University of Southern Maine. In addition to the official schedule, theatre-going, museum visiting, sightseeing and others were planned by “no host” for the rest of each day and were joined by those who were interested.
The two-week schedule of the RT Workshop can be explained in two parts: theory and preparation for performances in the first week and less theory and more performances in the second week. Specifically, the first-time participants, including myself, attended sessions such as RT background, scriptmaking demonstration and scriptmaking, rehearsals of fables, OI, staging demonstration, performance of the fables, and appreciation of RT performance presented by faculty members. The second week sessions included credit reports, rehearsals and performances, and special clothing demonstration by a guest faculty member. The total amount of the actual workshop hours is 55.5 in two weeks. All of the sessions were solely conducted in English, some in British English and mostly in American English.

2–1 Three elements for RT: scriptmaking

First, I will give RT the IRT definition (Adams, 2003): “RT is a presentational performance based on principles and techniques of oral interpretation and conventional theatre to present all kinds of literary and non-literary material in a choice of staging styles to entertain, instruct and persuade.” Since RT is a “presentational performance,” the first thing to be done is to choose a selection of materials on which you place value or importance to present to an audience.

For RT arrangement, as a rule, Adams (2003) suggests that there be “drama (conflict of characters, of ideas) inherent” in the selected piece. He also suggests to consider if there is a “strong basic situation with progressive action” and if the “characters are vivid.” There is another consideration that Adams suggests for RT arrangement: “First Person point of view presents special difficulties in achieving script proportions.”
2–2 Three elements for RT: staging

According to Adams (2003), there are three well established styles from the least overt staging, Simple RT, to the most active Chamber Theatre, with Staged RT in between along a presentational continuum. Simple RT is the “presentation of a script with an emphasis on interpretation of the text through inner responses of thought, emotion and experience (kinesics) with a minimum of physical activity.” Staged RT has “a formal setup, but externalizes the actions of the script with characters on revolving stools and narrators situated at music stands.” The closest to conventional theatre is called Chamber Theatre, which uses “more elaborate elements of stage craft and memorized lines.”

2–3 Three elements for RT: Interpretation

As Adams (2003) repeatedly states that the “oral interpreter needs to know everything possible about the literature to be presented to an audience,” it is vital to know the connotative meaning, as well as the denotative, of each word and its precise pronunciation in the first place. In other words, a superficial or surface reading of the selected material must be followed by a deeper reading of it before presenting it to the audience. A reader is supposed to know all of the figures of speech and must investigate to answer such journalistic questions as who, where, when, what and why of the selected materials.

3–1 Observation: scripting before the RT Workshop

Well before the RT Workshop began, each participant had been requested to submit material of his choice, which was to be scripted by the participant himself with the assistance of faculty in the first half of the two week
schedule. It was perfectly fine to pick “all kinds of literary and non-literary material” for scripting, as Adams (2003) writes, and he says that scriptmaking is “one of the most enjoyable features.” I was not quite sure, however, what literary material was appropriate for scriptmaking for my students in Japan. I knew both cast and audience would be my students whose English was limited and I also knew that I might want to use applications of RT productions for them when I got back to school. But I wondered which material would have an appealing subject.

The most obvious difficulty was that both cast and audience were the students who study English as a foreign language, but not knowing what material would be the most appropriate, I chose a piece of prayer from a web site and emailed it in. This piece was called “Prayer for Peace in Asia,” about 200 words in length. We read it in my reading class with the second-year students last semester. About 80% of my students revealed that they found the piece difficult, and yet informative and inspirational in the survey concluded in my reading class.

A couple of weeks later, they needed a longer piece to get it scripted at the RT Workshop and wanted me to add to it some other materials and put them together as one whole piece. The piece I selected was certainly not long, but would be long enough thinking of my students to perform it orally. I tried to look for something religious to go in harmony with it while considering that we study at a Catholic school, and finally found the “Lord’s Prayer” and “Luke 11:1–10” for addition. The combination of these three has a total of some 520 words in length and it was surely longer than the original selection.

3–2 Observation: scripting during the RT Workshop

At the RT Workshop, the materials I had selected for RT arrangement raised a question if they were really suitable for scripting. They say that some
RT techniques or principles for scriptmaking call for a few considerations on the appropriateness of the material for cast and audience: appealing subject, availability to the cast in terms of vocabulary and style, level of sophistication, literary value and content value. Although it was not entirely impossible for an experienced arranger to get them scripted, the selected parts were not the fittest in that most of the texts comprised of one character’s dialog and narration, as Adams (2003) cautions for RT arrangement: “First Person point of view presents special difficulties in achieving script proportions.”

In my scripting case, I attempted to cast the selected materials for three, but the nature of the selected texts in which there was a lot of Jesus speaking as First Person prevented me from doing it. Finally, I ended up casting all four of them, as our group faculty suggested, and dividing the narration “to reflect different character’s points of view.” The script proportion dramatically improved.

3-3 Observation: staging

I decided on the three religious pieces to perform at the RT Workshop for two reasons: one is that “Prayer for Peace in Asia” inspired both my students and me, and the other is that we study and work at a Catholic junior college. Bearing these reasons in mind, then, I had no other option in style but Simple RT to choose. Besides, Simple RT would be the easiest to employ for an inexperienced director like me.

Knowing that Simple RT emphasizes the reading part most, I directed the four readers, all native English speakers, to stand in a straight line most of the time with no music stands. As for “Luke”, I had two readers stand in the center by turns, in front of the rest, having the reader in front take care not to block the sight of the rear cast. I also led them to create a solemn, serious, and solid atmosphere by having them read in unison on the whole.
After the performance, I realized that only a few presentations done by other participants engaged in choral reading and even that partially.

3–4 Observation: interpretation

One of the most distinctive findings about the interpretation phase was that the English speaking participants knew more about the selected materials to be performed than I did, which was reasonable in most cases. I mean to say that native English speakers were able to conceive of the same piece that we interpreted deeper and quicker than I did. Connotative meaning, sensory images, and tone color, as they are called in the Adams’ book, are the three performance approaches that I found the most difficult to learn through actual experiences during the RT Workshop.

Also, my group faculty members suggested, more than once, to use much stronger projection of my voice at group performance. It was very interesting to know that my voice projection was not large enough and that it was hard for them to hear what I was trying to say, because it is my advice to some of my OI class students at the College in Japan. The fact that they pointed out my “weak” projection suggested that we work more on this part of interpretation as we teach Japanese students.

Additionally, the lengths of the selected pieces were quite a bit longer than the pieces that would probably be read by my students. Relatively shorter ones took 20–25 minutes to be finished by native English speakers and longer ones took 40–45 minutes and over at the RT Workshop. This also characterized the differences in selecting the material to be performed between the native English speakers and Japanese speakers studying English as a foreign language.
4-1 Exploring ways of applying RT

The RT Workshop has given me an occasion to become a reader/performer, a director, and a member of the audience, all of which I experienced for the first time in a setting where no Japanese reader and audience existed except for one. This has made me realize three aspects to be considered when I actually practice RT in a Japanese classroom to teach English.

4-2 Performing aspect

4-2-1 Speed

First of all, reading speed should be closely related to the length of the piece of material used for a performance, but English actually read by the performers at various presentations during the RT Workshop sounded very, very fast to my ears. It was so fast at times that it was impossible for me to follow the material while practicing. There were words or phrases that were deliberately read slower to the audience to give some connotations during the performances, but they were exceptions. It would be possibly true that native English speakers feel nothing unnatural about the speed at which the performances were done. They might feel, on the contrary, the performances would be strange, and might suspect if they had some special connotations unless the performances maintained the reading speed I had heard at the RT Workshop.

In the case of Japanese students performing RT as part of English learning, it would not be advisable to instruct them to increase the speed to make the performance become more “natural.” Some hard-working, motivated students could read the performing material as fast as native English speakers, but that might ruin the harmony of the group performers and most probably such speed would have to sacrifice natural intonation that must be more important than speed. As Asano (2005) insists, “differentiating
the speed of reading aloud in the middle of the performance will help the audience know changes in the meaning orally,” it would be a sensible suggestion that students as interpreters take more time to understand the performing material and attempt to connect their interpretation with the proper speed change to be used.

4–2–2 Gestures
The next issue to be considered in the performing aspect is gestures. Gestures here include such nonverbal communicative tools as facial expressions, miming, and body gestures, which are all employed in the RT performances now being discussed. I use the term “gestures” in this section to mean either one or two, or all of the nonverbals. Compared to native English speakers, Japanese speakers seem to use far less gestures while they engage conversations in various settings in their daily life. Therefore, there would be some confusing, bewildering, or strange expressions in the contexts of performing materials. Chances are that Japanese speakers might not know how to use a gesture, or what gesture to use, to go along with the context, not only because of differences in the use of gestures but because of the less frequent use of them.

To illustrate this, let me quote a line that I actually got confused with when I had to interpret and perform at one of the sessions for rehearsals. The lines are an excerpt from Kevin Patrick Necessary’s “The Last Normality.”

1. Jack stood up, his hands anxiously brushing at his sides, his eyes avoiding the gazes of the other six gathered.
2. Jack wrung his hands together, his palms balmy and sweaty. “I thought I was doing well with the project.

From the lexical and denotative meaning and the context, I gathered how Jack felt as he stood, but I could not picture how Jack moved his hands. I
wondered how your hands could “brush at your sides.” I got to watch an American colleague in my group show her hands brush at her sides and got that picture instantly. That was different from what I had imagined beforehand and it was new to me. Also, the implication of that nonverbal gesture differed from that of the Japanese context.

What are the ways for Japanese speakers to interpret and perform the selected materials where there can be a number of such phrases expressed by an author? I am afraid there are only a few. An English speaker would be the most reliable source who could demonstrate in front of the students such phrases that are hard to imagine. I would suggest to my students that they watch American or British films, shows, and photos to get a mental image of the gestures together with the contexts. I would even suggest that students imagine from the context and create some gestures that would go along with the context. These gestures would not necessarily be the same ones that are employed by native English speakers, but as long as they would help the audience comprehend the presentation, I could give them a green light, considering both performers and audience are Japanese speakers.

4–2–3 Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is the last issue to be considered in this performing aspect. In Staged Readers Theatre and Chamber Theatre, full use of the voice is suggested to interpret the performing materials. Interpreters are expected to be able to stimulate the senses of the audience, but the use of words and how the words sound in English are different from those of Japanese. Sounds described in some English words do sound similarly to Japanese onomatopoeia but most Japanese sounds conveying the equivalent meaning in English are described differently, so that it would be impossible for my students to produce the onomatopoetic words that should “make the English words come alive” (Stump, 2008) in the selected materials.

Here are two examples:
Example 1. The heat of the sun is pushing at me through the window. I can hear buzzing insects outside.
Example 2. The kettle starts whistling. As the whistle builds it makes me feel hotter.

(“Scrabble OR Tile ‘M’ For Murder,” Charlie Fish)

In Example 1, the buzzing insects may make the /zzz/ sound in English, creating a busy, unwanted, and hot connotative, but Japanese buzzing insects make /buun/ sounds, as in “boon,” giving the same connotation. Example 2, likewise, illustrates the differences in onomatopoeia in both languages, i.e., the kettle in English makes /sss/ sounds, and in Japanese it makes /pii:/ sounds, as in “peee,” when the water boils if the spout is equipped with a steam whistle.

My point is that Japanese speakers must be provided with model sounds made by native English speakers, when presenting to an English speaking audience, in order to make the prosaic or dramatic texts more emphatic. The Japanese English classrooms, however, cannot always find English-speaking teachers or informants. English dictionaries, including e-dictionaries, would be of no use when it comes to onomatopoeia because they just explain the representing sounds literally. On top of that, RT materials taken from literature are full of descriptions that depict the characters’ physical movements and narrations that sketch out the scenes.

My alternative would be to try using Japanese onomatopoeia where it is necessary in place of English onomatopoetic words. This would be more comprehensible and emphatic to Japanese speakers, and that still would be clearer to native English speakers than the making of uncertain sounds by Japanese speakers.

Here is an example:

“I was awakened by some noise at midnight. Every night I hear the lift come and go through the walls and the door of my room. So I started to sleep again, /haaa, hu:/, paying no attention to the noise: /kacha, kacha/.
In a minute or two, I gasped /ha:/ . I heard /kacha/ again from the door. I threw the bedclothes aside and jumped out of the bed! I tiptoed to the door! Gathering up my courage, I took a glance through the peep-hole and saw a stranger out there! Suddenly, /kon, kon/, the stranger knocked on the door without a word. I heard my heart thud, /dokki, dokki/ . . .

This quotation is from the passage I actually wrote for the RT Workshop and presented it by myself to the English audience at a session for OI. From the reactions at the discussion later, I found that the way the words were uttered effectively made the audience associate the sounds with suspense and that enhanced the meaning of the words, although the onomatopoeic words were presented not in English but in Japanese.

### 4–3 Interpretation aspect

My alternative would be that the teacher-director will focus their attention more on this stage of interpreting the materials to have a more fruitful and educational performance. By this I mean that the teacher-director should keep in mind that RT has more meaning than just getting engaged in choral reading. At the RT Workshop we were able to proceed to rehearsals at this stage without taking time for considering climaxes and various sensory images that the authors appealed to in the selections. That was almost instantly done by the experienced teachers.

Now RT can promote a high level of comprehension of the reading text, which is the first step for RT performance, because RT presentation is not done by rote memorization of the performing material without understanding it. RT is not the “oral imitation” of a model reader who reads the performing text. The teacher-director should place more emphasis on this aspect because the Japanese students tend to skip considering the meaning of the piece deeply and would like to go on to perform the material without giving any consideration to climaxes and sensory images (Asano,
Cooperative learning aspect

The fourth aspect is that RT is never completed without cooperation and responsibility in the performing group from the beginning to the end. RT requires group members’ cooperation or collaboration from the first phase of reading the selected material for analysis, then onto the phases of fluent oral reading for oneself and for the group, and to the last phase of actual performance. During these processes, one has to listen to others and work out somehow how to read the material together with the others. Also, one needs to be responsible for the improvement in reading and in performing one’s own role. Each member of the group is essential to the production so that everyone is highly expected to contribute by everyone else.

At a school setting, oftentimes groups to perform are randomly chosen by the teacher-director and for that reason groups find a variety of student-performers in them: strong readers, slow learners, weak performers, lazy students, habitual late-comers, quiet students and so on. Therefore, the group must be cooperative with each other and the individual has got to be responsible for himself. Everyone can have a chance to contribute in his own way.

Conclusions

Let me conclude about the RT Workshop and RT techniques with affirmative and favorable assertions in conjunction with teaching English to Japanese students at the College. The most significant harvest was that I had the experience of becoming a learner or a student again at the RT Workshop for the first time in years. It was helpful to look back on how the faculty tried to have effective and practical classes. It was also valuable to
understand how much insecurity and discomfort that students would feel when they had no idea what was being talked about.

I ascertained that almost all the students at the College are capable of maintaining cooperation and fulfilling the responsibility as a member of the RT group, knowing that they need to develop these social skills before graduation from the College. Take the student who was on the verge of discontinuing her practice for example, performers in the same group managed to create an ensemble in order to present RT in collaboration with one another. Be it foreign language learning or RT, both need a lot of time, repetition, and cooperation before it is completely presented to communicate with the audience.

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Notes

1 Adams (2003) notes that “Readers ‘THEATRE’ denotes our Institute name and its presentational Field. ‘THEATER’ denotes conventional representational performance.”
2 In this paper the RT Workshop indicates the 35th International Readers Theatre Workshop, which was held in London from July 20 to August 2, 2008.
3 The Lord’s Prayer (New King James Version)
Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as it is heaven.
Give us day by day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
And do not lead us into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.

Luke 11: 1–10 (New King James Version)

1 Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.”

2 So He said to them, “when you pray, say: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven.

3 Give us day by day our daily bread.

4 And forgive us our sins, For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

5 And He said to them, “Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves;

6 for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him;

7 and he will answer from within and say, ‘Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you’?

8 I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs.

9 So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

10 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

Prayer for Peace in Asia

For homeless children begging in the streets of Colombo,
close to a million internally displaced Burmese,
prostituted women waiting under Bangkok night lights,
church people and peace advocates killed in the Philippines:
We pray for peace.
For the victims of war-torn East Timor,
Tuvalu and Kiribati threatened by the rising sea level because of global warming,
the alarming rate of suicide incidents in Tokyo,
sexually abused migrant workers in Singapore:
We pray for peace.
For factory workers receiving low wages in Beijing,
the long-standing rift in the Korean Peninsula,
oppressed and persecuted Dalits in India,
refugees starving to death in Afghanistan:
We pray for peace.

For tsunami victims in South Asia,
troubled relationships between Taiwan and China,
babies born without eyes in Saigon caused by Agent Orange,
brothels filled with thousands of child sex slaves in Cambodia:
We pray for peace.

We pray for peace so that carpenters building rich peoples’ houses will have roofs over their heads,
the life-giving earth will bless us with its fruits,
farmers, whose tears and blood have watered the fields, will have food on their tables,
textile workers will clothe their weary bodies,
and those who struggle for peace will find justice,
because Christ is our peace.

References


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