Readers Theatre for Re-Learning EFL

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the roles of Readers Theatre (RT) in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in classrooms at a junior college in Japan. RT will impart comprehensive English language skills to the students who have limited learning experiences at high school. Also, there are indications that RT serves the needs of the students who wish to learn colloquial English but are weak at reading. RT for EFL classrooms should be investigated more as an effective way of re-learning English for junior college students.

1 Introduction

It is evident that the first year students at Nanzan Junior College in 2009 showed a wider gap on the TOEIC®IP tests between listening and reading comprehension than that of first year English majors nationwide in the same year (TOEIC, 2010). Nationwide, English majors scored an average of 252 on listening comprehension and 192 on reading, making a gap of 60. However, the gap between the two scores was 83 for our 2009 students. Although the data for the nationwide average is computed from 17,798 samples and ours are 240, it suggests that our students are weaker in reading than average English majoring students.

Surveys indicate that the students decided to enter the college to study English to become proficient in speaking it (Asano, 2004; 2006). This may explain why they tend to show less interest in reading English no matter what kind of reading they are involved with than they do in speaking-related classes. However, the use of RT has a clear advantage over standard
reading instruction (Trainin, Andrzejczak, & Egbert, 2007). By examining actual Readers Theatre (RT) classes, this article will 1) discuss how the RT experience helps develop reading comprehension and 2) attempt to show RT can meet the needs of the students’ English study at Japanese junior college.

2 RT Experience

RT will impart important knowledge, general knowledge, and analytical skills to students. Before reading texts orally, students need to comprehend a reading material and analyze the message authors convey to the reader. To make it happen, the students need vocabulary to understand the denotative meaning, general knowledge to understand the background of the piece they read, and analysis to find the truth and the facts written in the text message. Besides, they will develop oral reading skills, self-expression ability, and creativity for performance.

Let me divide the whole process of producing RT into six steps. Step 1 begins with choosing a text to read. Step 2 is reading and analyzing the text for comprehending its messages. Students or a teacher will then move on to Step 3, which is to get the text scripted for RT. Step 4 concerns oral reading of the analyzed text and interpreting it orally. Then, Step 5 is for staging, and Step 6 for practicing for completion. Now let us look at each step for details.

2.1 Selecting a RT piece

According to Adams (2003), RT is defined as “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.” For a piece for junior college students, therefore, anything can be used as a reading material as
long as it is properly scripted and staged.

For a RT class from Fall 2009 to Spring 2010, we chose *The Baker's Dozen*, already scripted by Aaron Shepard, because for most of the students RT was totally new. We spent time on analyzing and reading it orally as much as possible from the beginning to the end of the semester. We had *The First Day of School* written by William Saroyan, and *Quality Bond* written by Charlie Fish for another class at the College and for a course at Nanzan University, too. These two pieces were scripted by the author of this article and distributed to the students.

As Adams (*ibid*) explains, “stories, poems, novels, plays, essays, reports, articles” can be RT materials, but there is a rationale for the choice of each piece when it comes to EFL classrooms. *The Baker's Dozen* was suitable for RT beginners since the version we picked out had been scripted already and had directions in the text. The timing of the performance was carefully considered, too, for December completion as it dealt with Santa Claus. Its cultural implications were taken into account as well.

The English language used in *The First Day of School* was easy and plain but the message it gives the students was strong and clear: love. I chose it for the students who will perform RT for the second time. Also, I was able to script it for groups of five in a class of 30 students. The length of the performance was 15 minutes, 10 minutes longer than *The Baker's Dozen*. A large number of my students were involved with job seeking when we had to read *Quality Bond*, which described a young girl’s anguish about life in a foreign country. It was not that hard for the entire class to understand the girl, who had nobody to talk to or had a hard time finding a job. Selections for RT were planned carefully so that they could motivate the students.

### 2.2 Analyzing the Text

The second step for RT as an EFL activity was to read the text carefully and understand it thoroughly. Most of the students managed to translate the
texts into Japanese to get a rough idea of each piece. By doing so they were able to know the denotative meanings of the words and phrases. However, they never knew that they would also have to comprehend the connotative meaning to perform one later. Students’ feedback on the RT experience disclosed that in high school, they just learned how to translate English in a textbook into Japanese in preparation for their in-school and entrance examinations.

In fact, almost no one paid attention to the appreciation of characters who appeared in the story, what kind of purpose/theme the writer of each story had for writing it, and the background knowledge behind the story. Furthermore, they were never asked by the high school teachers for their reactions to the story after they read it. All they were interested in was translation into Japanese, studying the vocabulary that might be asked on examinations. Such being the case, therefore, they had a lot of difficulty reading to learn the theme/purpose, or understanding characters’ emotions in the pieces.

Once they were instructed to analyze the story, they quickly learned what to do and enjoyed getting involved with the analysis part. The students translated the texts into Japanese when they had to discuss the analyses they made, but they did so not for the purpose of translating them into Japanese. The Japanese translation was for their discussion purposes and this made great differences in their style of reading English. Because of the RT experience, the students learned how to read English: not for translation per se, but for thinking, communication, and discussion. Additionally, they became aware of the necessity of general knowledge and background information to appreciate literary work.

2.3 Script Making
Since RT uses texts not originally written for RT performance, we arranged them for performance in such a way as to retain textual integrity (Adams,
Students could make their own scripts. For this purpose, students need to read a text more carefully and to attempt to appreciate its literary meanings. Because of the time limitation during the course of work, we were unable to have material scripted by the students; however, this process is sure to provide them with chances for training in reading, writing, fostering creativity, and communication.

2.4 Oral Reading

2.4.1 Circle Reading

Oral reading at this stage means reading a piece aloud concentrating on correct pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm. This step makes it easier for them to express meaning orally at the next step. It is often disturbing for EFL students to get the meaning of the text as they go reading it aloud simultaneously, paying attention to its prosodic features. What we do is to have the students engage in circle reading. They read a sentence or character in turn without casting anyone in a role in order to check their pronunciation of new words. Besides, we check the assimilation, the linkage of syllables of the words, in the sentences. By checking these, students are ready to practice rhythm in the English sentence.

Also, the existence of the audience may be greatly different from what the students experienced in oral reading and pronunciation practice in high school English lessons. Students in RT always place a great importance on the audience, who listen and judge if the oral reading they hear is comprehensible enough. Many of the RT students realize that correct pronunciation with other prosodic features exist for audience, not necessarily for examinations.

Students’ reactions include that they had a very hard time getting the right English rhythm while practicing. In fact, in high school they study the pronunciation of words, the accentuation of syllables in a word, and
word stress in a single sentence, but they are often tested with written tests. Rhythm in an English sentence is taught insufficiently at high school and is omitted from testing.

**2.4.2 Reading for Oral Interpretation**

After spending a considerable amount of time for oral reading, RT students will go on to another step: oral interpretation. At this stage, they ask and answer journalistic questions of who, what, why, when, where and how before they can do oral interpretation. In other words, what is the connotative meaning of the statement the character or the narrator makes, as well as its denotative? What do narrators communicate for each character to the audience? Most students never imagine that pitch, tempo, loudness, or quality of the voice and a combination of these vocal variables take care of the meaning conveyed in the sounds. This stage is absolutely necessary for RT experiences but the process is usually omitted in high school.

This greatly affects the student’s oral interpretation. A statement can usually be read more than one way, depending on what is being communicated. However, there is no way for the student to convey the interpretation the way they want. The reason is that they only know just a few examples of vocal variables to employ to communicate meaning or message properly. They might know which variable to use for expressing anger, for instance, but people don’t always get angry in a loud voice. How about expressing sadness, shyness, curiosity, or indecisiveness? Japanese students may certainly conceive of how they speak Japanese in a manner of curiosity or indecisiveness, but they frequently get bewildered at the differences between the two languages. They had too little time to be exposed to an English environment so that it is next to impossible for them to think of which vocal variables to be used in a certain situation.

Another reason that students may find it difficult is they may never know if they are successful in oral interpretation until the teacher corrects their English. The students tend to believe that all the readers interpret a
text the same way, or have to do so, after having acquired a choral reading habit in English lessons for so long. It takes time before they discover that interpretations may vary from reader to reader, that nothing may be correct or incorrect, depending on what is communicated by the reader. This step reinforces the students’ comprehension and oral reading of the text.

2.5 Staging

Staging here is the presentational one to help the performers deliver a piece, so that the audience understands it better and enjoys it more. To be specific, staging includes the set up of a readers line with or without stools and music stands, on or offstage focus, the use of scripts, and movement (facial expressions, gestures) that go along with what they read. This is not an easy part of the production because getting the script well staged requires a careful reading of the script.

For the Japanese speakers of English at intermediate and basic levels, they have almost no idea of what movement or gestures can be used partly due to cultural limitations. The same goes for facial expressions. Some facial expressions are similar to those of Japanese, but are not necessarily identical. Also, creating an effective entrance and exit of the readers is needed to have the audience anticipate the piece before it begins, and enjoy the atmosphere of it when the performance is just done. Students are generally imaginative and creative, but students’ comprehension of the story plays an important role to be successful in making effective staging.

2.6 Practice for Performance

It is hard to say how many hours of practice we need before a performance, but students must meet for practice besides a weekly class. Some groups got together for a half hour every day before the first period at 9:00. Some others used a 90-minute-no-class period from their schedule to practice intensively. Some failed to meet altogether due to time-conflict or private
schedule, so they made a practice plan in which they practiced only with someone that was able to come.

All this does not seem hard after it is done, but some students wrote that the hardest thing they had experienced about RT is making their practice schedule fit to all. From this, some learned concession and some learned compromise. Some gave feedback that working intensively and attentively are necessary to get things done successfully.

We used a staged classroom for rehearsal and performance. Students appeared in turns on the stage and they heard brief comments from the teacher when they were done. Students wrote comments on the performances they watched and they give them out to the performers after all the performances were finished.

3 Pedagogical Implications of RT

3.1 Cultural Limitations: Onomatopoeia, Movement, Gestures, Facial Expressions

There are some cultural constraints that Japanese might not know: how English native speakers would communicate. For instance, these two languages use different onomatopoeia in almost all of their words. There are only a few that have similar expressions between them such as “shhh,” meaning “quiet,” which may, exceptionally, sound similar, but are not quite identical to each other. However, a rooster cries “cock-a-doodle-doo” in English, but not so in Japanese. Students cannot cry for a rooster in English unless they know what it is. Students are encouraged to learn as many onomatopoetic expressions as possible as they study the meaning of the words. It is not that easy, however, for the teacher whose native language is Japanese and who has less experience living in an English-speaking country to demonstrate how.

It is advisable that RT students use Japanese onomatopoetic sounds
in the piece they produce if they have no idea at all. The difference can be understood by the English speaking audience, because the audience has enough contextual information to guess what those sounds are for. It is likely, however, that the reactions from the audience will take a slightly longer time than they would in English. The same goes for movement, gestures, and facial expressions, all of which are also indispensable in performing RT. This is a very good opportunity to learn cultural differences expressed in the two languages.

3.2 Getting More in Short-Term Memory
Although it is allowed to read English from a script held in the hand or placed on a music stand, it spoils the continuity or the flow of performance if it is literally read word by word or sentence by sentence. It is desirable for the reader to retain as many words as possible in short-term memory by taking a look at the script. If the reader’s short-term memory gets any larger, it is expected that the reading speed gets faster and the performance becomes better, using movement and gestures at the same time.

3.3 Projection
One of the great differences in vocalization of Japanese and English is projection. The difference is so obvious that RT performance can provide a good occasion of practice in speaking English. It is easily imagined that speaking in a loud voice is required when speaking to an audience, but good projection is needed to express quietness, for example, to listeners. Students may be able to speak loudly and can project it but not necessarily so when speaking in a soft voice, which is employed by RT performances. Practicing for good projection in English will help current Japanese students whose articulation and projection in Japanese also seem to be weak in classes.
4 Reactions from the RT students

Students gave some feedback on their RT experiences. They wrote in Japanese a week after their first performance. They were translated into English by the author. Here is an example:

I’ve learned facial expressions and gestures help the audience appreciate the piece we read for them. (Student A)

It was instructed that students were both performers and audience. RT can be described as a communication tool between the two.

I paid almost no attention to how I pronounced the English I read at high school. Our teacher just told us to read, but never gave us any comment or advice on the way I read it aloud. Honestly, I was shocked by the fact that I had a lot of mistakes when I read the piece aloud. Everyone spoke so well and I felt bad. (Student B)

I knew I had poor English pronunciation, which kept me away from spending any time at all on pronunciation practice. I appreciate my group members, who helped me learn difficult sounds in English. (Student C)

RT will help develop listening skills as students listen to peers and the instructor. To get the right pronunciation or rhythm, students listen to others. A third comment concerns interpretation:

This was fun. Each group performed on the basis of their own interpretation of the story. I liked that a lot. At high school I never learned that there can be more than one interpretation of the words or phrases in the story. We were just busy determining if they were correct or incorrect, right or wrong. (Student D)

At high school students studied English by translating English into Japanese and memorized the Japanese translation as it was, for it was expected to be
tested.

The last one describes that the student made an effort at oral interpretation and attempted to reproduce Old Woman, a character of *The Baker’s Dozen*, to audience.

My character was Old Woman, whom I imagined to speak slowly in a low voice. And there are only a few parts where she appears. My group members were all so communicative in English and always helped me create the voice of Old Woman. Thanks to them, I had a very strong sense of achievement after the performance. (Student E)

### 5 Conclusion

Now that more students are entering with weak motivation for study and less proficiency in reading, it is suggested that the use of RT for EFL instruction will be beneficial for the students. Such students may have had unfavorable English learning experiences in high school, although they wish to learn again to be speakers of English. RT gives occasions to work with others, which helps them re-learn English. Since an audience is an indispensable part of the RT experience, students will obtain a greater sense of responsibility in how they communicate.

### References


