Integrating Readers Theatre to Reinforce Reading Comprehension on Selected Short Stories among Low-Performing Students in A Rural School

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ABSTRACT
One of the most significant purposes of reading is inarguably comprehension. Most researches have shown that reading fluency and reading comprehension goes hand in hand. One mostly suggested way to investigate this relationship is through repeated readings. Research has also shown that English language learners learn to read in much the same way as native English speakers (Egmand B, 2009). This study investigates the relationship between readers’ theatre exercises and students’ reading comprehension. This research therefore examined whether the ESL students have positive experiences on the integration of Reader’s Theatre in the classroom’s teaching and learning activity. This study specifically focuses on Form One ESL students from a rural secondary school in Kedah. Students are given a developmental reading assessment followed by five sessions of Readers’ Theatre exercises. The same assessment is given to the students following readers’ theatre instruction to determine gains made. Findings indicates that Readers Theatre practice integrated in classroom learning impacts respondents in a positive way and reinforces students’ reading comprehension on selected short story as well as motivates them to read. This study also reveals that most of the participants share the same view that such a practice is much favoured to be integrated in the learning event.

Keyword: ESL Learners, Reader’s Theatre, Reading Comprehension, Short Story,

INTRODUCTION
Most of the students grapple and struggle to read literature texts. As a result, their understanding of the prescribed literature texts, generally the short stories are a primary let-down. Since Readers Theatre has a reasonably gleaming reputation for helping students to become better readers which in a way will enhance their reading comprehension, it would be interesting to investigate what kind of impact these exercises have on the students with poor reading skills and limited comprehension on literature text. Unfortunately, Readers’ Theatre is rarely thought as an alternative approach evidently in Malaysia because of the restricted exposure. Most of the local teachers are also hesitant to try out new method in classroom teaching and learning as opposed to the conventional methods of teaching. This negative attitude generally stems from a fear of failing and refusal to be different than the others. For this very reason, I am mostly intrigued to find out how Reader’s Theatre can benefit teachers in Malaysia.
Objective

The general objective of this programme is to enhance students’ reading fluency, reading comprehension and make them aware of their roles as a reader. Through this programme, the teacher hopes to:

- Investigate the effects of the integration of Readers Theatre in classroom teaching and learning process among the rural less proficient students.
- Investigate if the finding gained from the experimental research can improve these students’ reading skills.
- Allow the students to specifically benefit from having opportunities for repeated reading and modelling of fluent reading.
- Identify the possibility of using Readers’ Theatre to Form 1 students in rural area where students are mostly low proficient English users.
- Counter the difficulties encountered by the students particularly in comprehending literature text.

Literature Review

The literature reported several techniques to be effective in improving fluency including the reading and rereading of text a number of times until a certain criterion is reached. Several writers have suggested one effective approach of increasing fluency through repeated reading is using Reader’s Theater (Rasinski, 2002).

Coger and White (1982) suggest that both readers and theater are crucial elements in this art form. “Readers Theater is a shared happening between performers and audience as each has a part in the transaction”. This means that both performer and audience have significant role in determining a good Readers Theatre. Most Reader Theatre is created “from simple fairy tales, short stories and fables” (Worthy and Prater, 2002). Apart from that, the instructors can also use and incorporate non-fiction and informational texts as valuable sources for the preparation of the scripts in Readers Theatre instruction (Martinez, 1998).

Readers Theatre is defined “as a type of repeated reading that can engage and motivate students to participate.” (Millian Rinehart). Readers Theatre involves the “presentation of a short drama or interpretive reading that has been selected and rehearsed without the emphasis on memorizing lines by lines or paying attention on preparing heavy props” (Martines, et.al, 1998). Rinehart further suggests that Readers Theatre is good mainly because “it provides interpretive activities in which children practise and perform for others a scripted reading”. (Kelleher, 1997), on the other hands, defines Readers Theatre as the “oral interpretation of literature presented by readers who bring forth the full expression of the literature through their oral reading”. Here we can see that Readers Theatre is highly valued and acknowledged that it is given such a big role.

Readers Theater is a form of story-telling which is regarded as therapeutical to the readers. This is because the stories told by readers help students with their feeling. “When a child is helped to think about his troubled feelings through story, it can prevent these feelings from building up into an awful mess inside” (Margot Sunderland (2005). In other words, readers’ theatre help student pour their uneasy feelings out by getting involved closely as the characters in the performance of readers theatre. They use their facial expression, appropriate intonation and gestures to feel the characters they carry.

Apart from that, the readers also make an effective response when they tell a story as much as what they are expected to do in performing readers’ theatre. It is widely perceived that the language the students used in carrying out readers theatre is not the natural language they use what more for the ESL learners. But nonetheless, the words of literature used in performing literature help students to improve language learning. “Learners especially
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children normally have limited vocabulary index and they have so many unknown words to describe hundreds of feelings” (Margot Sunderland, 2005). Therefore, with the help and guidance from the teacher who incorporates Readers Theater in classroom teaching, they learn to associate a lot of feelings with correct choice of words. This in a way will help learners to improve and widen their vocabulary index.

Methodology

Research Design

Readers Theatre is a form of story-telling which is regarded as therapeutic to the readers. This is because the stories told by readers help students with their feeling. “When a child is helped to think about his troubled feelings through story, it can prevent these feelings from building up into an awful mess inside” (Sunderland, M., 2005).

This programme takes place at one of the rural schools in Malaysia, located in one of the FELDAs. The school’s performance particularly English is generally unsatisfying. This has prompted me into looking at the possible reasons as to why it has succumbed to such a scenario. Not only does the school fail to meet the expectation, but it also gains no high-flying achievement in English related competition such as English Drama Competition, Choral Speaking, English Parliamentary Debate and others. To simply give in to the fact that other schools have better students is simply not quite right. Therefore, I have chosen this school to see if the practice of Readers’ Theatre would pave a way for even a little significant change on the students’ understanding of the selected literature texts.

The research design involves a pre and post comprehension test and oral reading fluency to investigate the participants’ reading comprehension before and after a five-session Readers Theatre instruction carried out in a secondary English class setting besides delving deeper in investigating their motivation towards reading. Following this research design, there were three stages involved for this very study. First, all participants were administered a pre-test on reading comprehension. Subsequently, in the second phase, all participants had to undergo a five sessions Readers Theatre instruction which were guided by the researcher teacher. Finally, after the five-session instruction period is completed, the next stage included the post-test on reading text comprehension. These phases are described in detail in the following sections.

Instrument

Oral reading fluency for pre-test & post-test. For the pre-test, oral reading is done to evaluate the students reading fluency by getting the score of their reading accuracy. Before this is done, it is really crucial to pick up just the right text for the participating students to carry out the oral test. According to the literature, texts had to be chosen with the goal of the assessment in mind (Daly, et.al 2005). For this present study, the texts for the oral reading test were adopted from Form 1 literature text book and the story “One is One and All Alone” was selected from the list of short stories available to assess the participants’ oral reading fluency as well as their reading comprehension.

Considering that most of the participants in the class were all intermediate English learners and portrays limited English reading proficiency or word recognition, the dialogues taken from the short story are simplified. The oral reading test is then set. In order to compare the students’ performance on oral reading fluency before and after the instruction, participants are instructed to do the exact same test on oral reading fluency after the five sessions of Readers Theatre instruction.

Pre and Post Reading Comprehension Test. In order to study the impact of Readers Theatre instruction on students’ reading comprehension, comprehension test is
administered to both experiment and control group. It is done to see if there is any significant difference in the pattern of students’ achievement in the test before and after the instruction of Reader Theatre. In the mean time, the other group, the control group is given no clinical intervention and they would be the control subjects for this study. The questions are set for the low level proficiency students since they are from this category of the group. Two tests are administered, one before the instruction and the latter after the five sessions instruction of Readers Theatre in classroom learning and teaching event.

Questionnaires. A questionnaire was administered as another useful research instrument for this study. The questionnaire in this study was designed primarily based on the questionnaire set by Guthrie and Wigfield (1997), which included three elements of motivation for reading. They are reading curiosity, importance of English as well as reading involvement. According to the literature, the aspects of intrinsic motivation are more likely to “encourage students to be active in reading” (Guthrie, Bennett & McGough, 1994). In Guthrie and Wigfield’s study, these aspects are self-efficacy beliefs, intrinsic motivation and social aspects of motivation. The aspect of intrinsic motivation is investigated in this study because it has a close relation with the Readers Theatre instruction. Intrinsic motivation means that “individuals are motivated to choose or to do things for their own sake” (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Readers Theater instruction, it is often argued, makes reading “fun, enjoyable and encourages students to become engaged in the process of reading. Regarding the social aspects of motivation, this motivation assumes reading as a social activity” (Wigfield, 1997). Readers Theater instruction requires students to work together in groups during reading activities.

Considering the participants’ limited English proficiency, this questionnaire dealing with motivation for reading was written in both Bahasa Malaysia and English (Appendix 2 and Appendix 3). In addition, the response items were modified to simple “Yes” and “No” responses for these young learners. To compare students’ motivation for reading before and after the study, students are asked to complete the same questionnaire after the conclusion of the Readers Theater instruction. However, a section was added in the latter questionnaires. This additional section talked about the participants’ perception on the instruction of Readers Theater in the classroom. This section is not included in the pre questionnaires because the students had no experiences pertaining to Readers Theatre instruction. Thus, this particular construct is intended to seek the participants’ insight on their perception of Readers Theatre after the five-session instruction.

Treatment & Procedures

Reading aloud and choral reading. In the first session, there are two steps conducted. First, script is read aloud to model how to read fluently with appropriate voice interpretation, such as pronunciation, intonation and pauses. This can encourage the participants’ willingness to read on their own. After modelling, participants are asked to practice Readers Theatre in groups. When practicing reading together in groups, all students can listen to teacher who models how to read the scripts.

Choral Reading and Repeated Reading. In the second session, students remain in their Readers Theater groups and read their scripts together with other group members. Choral reading and repeated reading are used to provide support for those less fluent students from their peers. During choral reading, students alternate between various roles and practise different lines. Repeated reading provides students with sufficient practice to read scripts fluently.

Rehearsal. In the third session, all group members started to rehearse for a performance, using repeated reading practice. It was also during this period of time that students were encouraged to discuss the delivery of their performance of their script in front
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of an audience. Each group could practice greeting or ending sentences like "Good morning, everyone. We’re group 1. Today, we are going to present the first scene in the story of ‘One is one and all alone’." Groups were allowed to make some simple props if necessary during this period of time.

Performance. The last session allows students to perform the script in front of the class. It is the time when each group presents their performance. Before the performance, students are allowed to have a short rehearsal to practice. After the performance, the whole class would have a short discussion.

Data collection. The research looks through all analyzable instruments returned consisting of 39 sets of pre and post test of comprehension questions and 20 sets of questionnaires distributed among the participating students who take part in the five-sessions Readers’ theatre instruction.

Data are collected from the participating students involving 20 students who took part in this five-session reader’s theatre instruction. In the mean time, the comprehension questions are distributed to both control and experiment group to see if there is any difference in term of students’ performance between the control group and the experiment group at the end of the procedure. Thus, 39 set of answered test both from the pre test and post test were collected to analyse the impact of Readers Theatre instruction to the experiment group.

Data analysis & reporting procedures. In an attempt to study the impact of Readers’ theatre instruction on students’ performance in academic, the researcher set out a reading comprehension test to each student consisting of both experiment and control groups. The tests are administered at the same time and each student gets the same pre test question. Each responded instrument in which it seeks for the answers to all the questions is calculated to investigate the effectiveness of this method. Data were analyzed by using descriptive analysis. To make it more presentable and clearer, tables and graphs are prepared.

Discussion & Result

Comprehension Test

In this particular study, almost all participants from the experiment group improve and score better for the pre test as opposed to the other control group. Low-ability students improve the most after the Readers Theater instruction and one of them manages to score as high as 70% although he fails with 0 mark in the pre test. More remarkably, results showed that six of them managed to strike a perfect score. This has widened the gap between those students who participated in the instruction and those who remained in the control group. The overall picture of the students’ performance is shown in Graph 5.2 and Graph 5.3 above.

However, the results are slightly different for the second group that acts as a control group. Even though quite a number of students chalks up improvement for the post test; there are still few students who fail to do so to join the rest of the class members. They either score worse or show no improvement. From all 19 students from this group, 2 students flop in the second test and three more did not show any improvement at all, a total of five who failed to show improved mark for the second test. Only one student scores a perfect mark. This pretty much contradicts from the experiment group because none of them score below than 60% for the pre test.
Graph 5.2 Marks obtained (in 100%) by Each Students in Pre- and Post-test from the experiment group.

Graph 5.3: Marks obtained by Each Students in Pre-Test and Post-test from the control group.
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Motivation for Reading.

The first aspect to be analyzed from the returned questionnaire is reading curiosity (Numbers 1, 2, and 3) followed by the importance of reading (Numbers 4, 5 and 6) and reading involvement (Numbers 7, 8, and 9) in Table 4.6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I like reading English materials at school</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I like to read English story books.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>By learning to read English, I hope I will be able to read English story books</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importance of Reading

4 Learning to read in English is important because it will be helpful for me to learn other subjects in schools. 17 20
5 Learning to read in English is important because it will broaden my view. 15 18
6 Learning to read in English is important because it will make me a more knowledgeable person. 13 18

Reading Involvement

7 I tend to get deeply engaged in English reading activities at school. 15 17
8 It is fun to read in English. 15 19
9 I get engaged in reading interesting stories even if they are written in English. 7 9

Generally, as can be seen from the table above, all items show positive increment suggesting that most of the students are opening up to the idea of integrating Reader’s Theatre in language lesson.

In summary, the instruction of the Readers Theatre has improved participants’ reading fluency, reading comprehension, and perception.

Conclusion

This approach has the potential to be used by other school or any educator who feels that it may benefit their students. As it runs on a low budget, it is affordable by many parties to carry it out. However, results may differ and it is the role of the educator to change certain elements in the programme according to the needs of their own respective classroom. As for this study, positive impact of these exercises can be seen on the students with poor reading skills and limited comprehension on literature text. In other countries, readers’ theatre is widely believed to be capable of increasing students’ reading fluency, which will in turn improve students’ overall reading comprehension (Tyler, 2000). Educators and researchers are also positive that ‘Readers’ theatre can motivate children to read the same material repeatedly to increase fluency’ (Vacca, et al, 2003) just like what the participants for this study show.
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Reference


