What is Readers’ Theater?

Readers’ Theater (RT) involves the oral rendering of a literary (or content-oriented) text that may be of interest to an audience, traditionally, with a minimum of staging, costuming, props or the like. (However, introducing some elements of traditional theater is fun.)

As a form of reading instruction, it is a motivating way to engage developing readers in repeated reading, which in turn provides opportunities to call attention to sound/spelling correspondence patterns and to promote more rapid word recognition, both of which tend to facilitate reading fluency, and lay a foundation for better comprehension.

Reading Fluency

Although savvy reading teachers have long known the importance of reading fluency as a goal of reading instruction, its importance is often neglected in ESL and EFL programs. Reading fluency became somewhat of a hot topic in L1 reading in the 2000s and may be catching on in L2, (as L2 trends often follow L1). Still, it currently seems to be the poor stepchild in second language reading programs, which may be more likely to see a need for comprehension instruction. Without discounting the value of comprehension instruction, it seems pertinent to suggest that promoting reading fluency is in itself a way to address the comprehension deficits that many second language readers exhibit.

Cognitive Roots of Reading Fluency

Many interesting models of reading have emerged over the last 20-30 years. One that still has tremendous heuristic value for practitioners, even if it is too general as a comprehensive model of reading, is LaBerge and Samuels (1974) article, “Toward a Theory of Information Processing in Reading,” based on the notion of automaticity. This theory has been particularly useful in promoting effective fluency instruction. It can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Fluent reading is a complex multi-process cognitive operation
2. The processing ability of the brain is limited such that
3. Newly learned skills (like decoding an unfamiliar orthography) proceed slowly, requiring conscious attention and deliberate effort
4. Practice speeds processing, decreasing attentional resources
5. Well practiced processes can eventually proceed virtually automatically, making attention available for other processing demands (e.g., understanding a complex narrative or argument).

Samuels (1979) subsequently proposed a practical application of the theory in an article in The Reading Teacher, “The Method of Repeated Reading.” Research has shown the method to be quite powerful, and a number of variations have emerged, all of which seem to be effective.
Repeated Reading

Classic version – Select a short passage. Skilled reader models oral reading. Student follows along silently. Then student reads up to 4 times, aiming to increase speed, accuracy, and expressivity. Perfect way to begin mastering a script.

Variations

The following variations can be used at appropriate times throughout the process of learning, mastering, and polishing a script.

- Technology-assisted: Prepare a recording. Student listens to the recording and reads along, silently at first, and then aloud.
- Pair-reading: Pair stronger peers and weaker peers. Readers can read in unison or take turns.
- Choral-reading: A whole group can read in unison or as subgroups (like the sections of a choir).
- Echo-reading: Break the script into phrases or groups of phrases, being careful to respect syntactic boundaries; (this can be done spontaneously by a skilled reader). Novice reader repeats each phrase or group of phrases after the skilled reader, matching prosodic features.

Doing Readers’ Theater

From the perspective of reading pedagogy, Readers’ Theater is a form of fluency instruction that employs repeated reading. However, from the inside, RT is a performing art, which like any performing art requires “rehearsal.”

From the inside, it seems to me that in doing RT, the teacher may play the following roles (although the teacher need not necessarily be the sole person responsible for each role; some roles can be shared with students, or teaching assistants):

Script Writer

Scripts can be found ready made for RT. They are as close as a Google search. However, when I tried to find ready-made scripts, I was not happy with what I found. Therefore, I resorted to adapting materials that I liked better which involved some script writing.

I used Aesop’s Fable (from web sources), Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling, some short stories adapted for English language learners:
- More Surprises
- Sudden Twists
(by Burton Goodman: Jamestown Publishers)
I am currently using materials from Oxford University Press’ Bookworms Series. This is a series of graded readers in six levels, which makes it very easy to provide students with level appropriate texts.

Tips for Script Writing

- Try fables and short stories with clever plots and interesting dialog
- Select material that will not require extensive narration to carry the story
- Teach students to produce the basic script by going through the story and picking out the dialog
- Teach basic scripting conventions (e.g., dialog in plain type, directions in italics or parentheses).
- If a story has a lot of narration, try to recast some of the narration by inventing dialog for the characters that will carry the narrated information
- Another way to deal with extensive narration is to have two narrators who deliver different parts of the narration through conversation between them.
Dialect Coach

Here the teacher is actually concerned with the interface between reading and speaking. As a reading skill, the issue is decoding (sound-spelling correspondence)/word recognition while in terms of speaking, what we have is pronunciation work. It may be necessary with some populations to do phonics type work (synthetic and/or onset-rime instruction).

Basic Rules of Thumb For Stage Conduct

1. When two readers are interacting, they tend to give the audience their profiles or even their backs. Instead, they should use what is called ¼ position.

2. Readers should generally arrange themselves so that they do not hide behind other readers (unless there is good reason).

3. Stay in character at all times.

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Terminology

Quarter Position

like this

not like this...

Audience

So the audience can see the reader’s faces.

Prosody

Expressive oral reading requires an understanding of English stress, rhythm, and intonation. The teacher can provide this by modeling or recording skillful readers reading aloud.

Of course, on the reading fluency side of the equation, what is necessary is reasonable speed and accuracy, and absence of hesitancy. Expressivity and fluency go hand in hand.

Promoting Fluency and Expression

- Teachers can start by modeling passages themselves
- Students practice reading with selective feedback
- One-on-one coaching as needed— instructor reads a line and student repeats
- Repeated readings with spot corrections and drilling on problem spots
- Encourage reading in phrases using “peek and speak” (i.e., reader looks at the text and tries to hold a chunk of text in memory, then looks up and delivers it
**Choreographer**

Choreography refers to the design of movement. It is perhaps a much more specialized theater skill than others that have been mentioned and less amenable to quick study.

**Working with Movement**

- Keep it simple
- Ordinary movements and gestures tend not to project, so just as the voice must be louder to carry, movements must be bigger and more expansive

**Set Design**

An interesting background can enhance the audience’s experience, but as with movement, keep it simple. Our solution to set design involved the use of projected images organized by means of PowerPoint slides.

**Producer**

It is important to perform for a real audience, so make sure to line one up. It gives the readers a reason to put on the best performance that they are capable of.

**Conclusion**

Readers’ Theater is an enjoyable and worthwhile activity in its own right. Moreover, the process of rehearsal in Readers’ Theater, by its very nature, entails repeated reading—a form of reading practice, which research has suggested has a positive effect on the development on reading fluency and ultimately on reading comprehension.

**Bibliography**

A selection of sources on Readers’ Theater (includes L1 and L2 context).


A modest list of sources covering theory and research relevant to repeated reading, the principle underlying Readers’ Theater as a form reading instruction.

**Classic articles**


**General Overviews**


**Reviews of Research**


**Repeated Reading in L2 Context**


