Assuming Multiple Roles in the Development of a Readers' Theater Course

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Bio Data

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Abstract

This article was inspired by an exploration of readers' theater as the focus of a semester long topics course, given as one of five courses required of full-time students enrolled in a university intensive English program. The article briefly describes how the author conceived the course as a strand within the context of a broader program. It provides a brief characterization of readers' theater. It offers a cursory overview of theory and research attesting to the effectiveness of readers' theater (and the underlying principle of repeated reading) as a tool for promoting reading fluency. It appropriates terms used to describe the functional division of labor in traditional theater arts to enumerate the various functions (scriptwriter, dialect coach, director, choreographer, set designer, and producer) that the teacher might perform in developing a course around the practice of readers' theater. Finally, it addresses its central purpose as a "how to" article for those interested in experimenting with an enjoyable and creative means of promoting reading fluency.

Keywords: Readers' theater, reading fluency development, repeated reading, reading aloud

Introduction

In the spring semester of 2008, one of my assignments in the Intensive English Language Institute (IELI) at Utah State University was to teach a 4-credit topics course to upper-beginning and lower-intermediate level English language learners.[1]

Having on a previous occasion developed a literature course for this particular level, I was at the time prepared to teach it again, but the culminating experience of that previous literature course kept coming to mind, urging me to consider another possibility. The last time I had taught the aforementioned literature course, it had occurred to me, quite near the end of the semester, to have the students transform the last short story (an adapted version of "Mammon and the Archer" by O. Henry) into a script to be performed on the final day of class to a small audience of invited guests. Now it occurred to me—why not do the entire literature course in just this way, as *readers' theater*?

As I deliberated over my decision, the potential benefits of the idea became increasingly apparent. Preparing to read scripts for oral presentation would require repeated reading in order to do it well, that is to say smoothly, fluently, comprehensibly and with expression. Silent repeated reading was a technique that I already used in many of my reading classes to promote fluency and enhance comprehension, but rehearsing for oral performance would give students a more tangible purpose for repeated reading. Moreover, the integration of a major oral component into the course would afford opportunities for students to work on pronunciation, something that some students in the program clamored for, but which the program tends not to address in a systematic way.

The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that readers' theater would make an excellent topics course, albeit, a different kind of topics course, one more akin to a course in the performing arts than to a content course. It would, I thought, address aspects of reading and aspects of speaking that IELI's reading and speaking courses do not necessarily in themselves adequately address. At the same time, I felt that although the students and I would work hard in this class on worthwhile objectives, it would be the kind of class that would seem more like play

than like work, and coming at the end of a long day, as topics courses do, it would be an enjoyable and relaxing way to end that day.

As I began developing the course, I found myself quite naturally assuming a variety of distinct roles. Eventually appropriating the language of theater to describe these roles, I became scriptwriter, director, dialect coach, choreographer, set designer, and producer. This article is my attempt to share the insights that came out of this process. I begin with a brief characterization of readers' theater, followed by a sampling of literature documenting its benefits as a form of reading instruction. The most important section of the article then follows in which I offer reflections, suggestions and advice on how to fulfill the various roles involved in running a readers' theater course.

What is readers' theater?

Readers' theater (RT) is an art form involving the oral interpretation of a literary text, usually by two or more readers for the benefit of an audience. According to Coger and White (1967), the roots of Readers Theater spring from the dramatic practices of 5th century Greece. In more recent times, RT came into vogue in the North American context on the professional stage in the 1950s and its academic counterpart flourished in the 1960s and later, after which it subsequently spread to the elementary and secondary school context as a promising approach to basic literacy.

In its purely theatrical form, it differs from what we are generally accustomed to regarding as theater in a number of ways. For one, it tends to minimize staging, costuming, and use of props, placing a greater emphasis on the aural elements of the literature, which is read, not memorized. Moreover, unlike traditional theater, which tends to establish a clear separation between characters who interact with an on-stage focus, and the audience, which is positioned as an unseen onlooker, readers' theater is

more likely to adopt an off-stage focus, establishing a direct connection with the audience. Even when one character addresses another, the relationship may be indirect, mediated by the audience.

In its adaptation as an educational tool, where it is often practiced by teachers without extensive backgrounds in the theater arts, one might expect the distinctions between readers' theater and theater to have become more blurred. Indeed, in experimenting with readers' theater in educational settings, there may be some advantages in retaining some of the elements of traditional theater, not the least of which is the greater familiarity of the likely participants with the conventions of traditional theater. The approach to readers' theater discussed in this article represents a cross between readers' theater and traditional theater.

Readers' theater as reading instruction: A sampling of research

Because participation in readers' theater involves rehearsal as preparation for performance, RT by its very nature involves repeated reading, a technique advocated by Samuels (1979) to improve fluency by promoting automaticity in the decoding of words, thus speeding up word recognition and freeing cognitive resources for higher order comprehension processes (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Indeed, repeated reading has proven to be a powerful technique for improving reading fluency among both L1 readers (Dowhower, 1989; Rasinski, 1990; Sindelar, Monda, & O'Shea, 1990) and L2 readers (Gorsuch, & Taguchi 2008; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004). Readers' theater, while deriving its efficacy as a fluency builder from repeated reading, is however less likely to be seen by students as an exercise and more likely to be perceived as an authentic "real world" activity, which may account for its appeal among teachers and curriculum experts in elementary education, where the value of RT as a form of reading instruction first caught on.

As has been the case with repeated reading, research on the benefits of readers' theater for developing L1 readers has consistently shown it to promote increased fluency as measured by factors such as reading rate as well as improvements in prosodic aspects of reading like fluidity, phrasing, and expressiveness (Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998; Rinehart, 1999). Studies in which readers' theater has been used in EFL contexts (e.g., Chen, 2006) and ESL contexts (e.g., Liu, 2000) have also shown it to be effective in increasing the reading rates of L2 readers. The above mentioned studies have also noted readers' theater to be a highly motivating form of reading practice for both L1 and L2 readers.

Teacher roles in RT course development

Having now defined readers' theater and sampled the research literature attesting to its value as a form of reading instruction, we are ready to examine the multiple roles that the teacher can expect to assume in building an entire course around readers' theater. Again, it seems to me that in doing RT, the teacher must play the following roles (although the teacher need not necessarily be the sole person responsible for each role as some roles can be shared with students, or teaching assistants, if available).

Scriptwriter

In order to get started doing readers' theater, it is necessary to have a script or scripts appropriate to the language proficiency level of the readers. It is not difficult to find scripts for readers' theater. They are as close at hand as a Google-search. However, when I tried to find ready-made scripts appropriate to my context, I was not particularly happy with what I found. I therefore quickly resorted to adapting materials that I liked better, and this involved some scriptwriting. I began my course

using materials gathered from the Internet in the form of Aesop's fables[2]. I had previously used Aesop's fables and found them to be good starters for a literature topics course (for which I had employed a more content-based approach).

Aesop's fables are short and frequently easily recognized across cultures. They are good tools for first day assessments. They can be read quickly. Initial discussions revolving around characters, setting, plot, and theme (the moral or lesson) provide an indication of students' listening comprehension and oral fluency, as well as orienting them to some basic concepts of literary analysis. Moreover, a brief round of oral reading, in which each student reads several lines loud, can give the teacher an indication of students' current reading fluency. The language of Aesop's fables can be a little archaic, but many versions are available online, and besides they can be easily rewritten, as necessary.

From Aesop, we moved on to several selections from Rudyard Kipling's, *Just So Stories*[3] and then on to some short stories from the *Five-Star Series*[4] adapted for English language learners. While a preponderance of the selections might seem more fitting to children than to university students, I found my students quite open to them, and all the more so because the audience for our first performance was to be in an elementary school, a point that I will return to later.

Scriptwriting adds an additional creative aspect to the teachers' role as well as adding opportunities for students to manipulate language productively. I structured my RT course such that scriptwriting was a partially shared responsibility. During the early phases of the course, students worked together in groups to rewrite four of Aesop's fables as scripts. Student scripts then underwent a round of editing in which I made minor corrections and in several cases elaborated where I felt scripts were underdeveloped. With other adaptations (e.g., the *Just So Stories*), I assumed full responsibility, as I was anxious for the resulting script to be as "professional" as

possible since it would ultimately be performed to an audience of native English speakers.

The following guidelines describe the principles I found myself applying in selecting and adapting materials for use in readers' theater:

- Select materials with clever plots and interesting dialog or the potential for interesting dialog.

- Select materials 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 and explanations in italics or parentheses).

- If a story has a lot of narration, try to recast some of the narration by inventing additional dialog for the characters in order to reveal the narrated information.

- When there is extensive narration, try dividing the narration between two (or more) narrators who deliver different parts of the narration in the form of conversation between them.

Let's examine several excerpts from the course materials as an illustration of several of the above points. Table 1 shows an excerpt of an Aesop fable, "The Hare With Many Friends," along with its transformation into a script.

Table 1. "The Hare With Many Friends"

Original	Script
A hare was very popular with the other animals, who all claimed to be her friends. But one day she heard the hounds approaching and hoped to escape from them with the help of her many friends. So, she went to the horse, and asked him to carry her away from the hounds on his back. But he refused, saying that he had important work to do for his master. "He felt sure," he said, "that all her other friends would come to her assistance." She then applied to the bull, and hoped that he would repel the hounds with his horns. The bull replied: "I am very sorry, but I have an appointment with a lady; but I feel sure that our friend the goat will do what you want." …	**Narrator**: A hare was very popular with the other animals, who all claimed to be her friends. But one day she heard the hounds approaching and hoped to escape from them with the help of her many friends. So she went to the horse. **Hare**: Mr. Horse, Mr. Horse!! The hounds are coming. Can you carry me away on your back? **Horse:** I'm sorry, but I have important work to do for my master. I am sure the bull will help you. Why don't you go to him? **Narrator**: So the hare went to the bull. **Hare**: Mr. Bull, Mr. Bull!! The hounds are coming. Can you chase them away with your horns? **Bull**: I'm so sorry, but I have an appoint-ment with a lady. Maybe the goat could help you. Why don't you go ask him? **Narrator**: Quickly, the hare ran to the goat.

In this excerpt, the amount of narration has been greatly reduced, first by extracting instances of direct dialog and assigning characters to carry it, and secondly by transforming implied speech into dialog, as when: *But he refused* becomes *"I'm sorry, but…"* and as when: *She then applied to the bull and hoped that he would repel the hounds with his horns …* becomes *"Mr. Bull, Mr. Bull!! The hounds are coming. Can you chase them away with your horns?"*

In "The Crow and the Pitcher" (Table 2), the narration is divided between two narrators, who themselves become characters, as from their position in the background, the audience sees them narrating the story, as if conversing with each other, reminding one another how the story goes, while they observe another reader, the thirsty crow, meditating upon his predicament, and finally announcing his eureka experience:

Table 2. "The Crow and the Pitcher"

Original	Script
A crow, half-dead with thirst, came upon a pitcher which had once been full of water; but when the crow put its beak into the mouth of the pitcher he found that only very little water was left in it, and that he could not reach far enough down to get at it. He tried, and he tried, but at last had to give up in despair. Then a thought came to him, and he took a pebble and dropped it into the pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped it into the pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the pitcher. At last, at last, he saw the water mount up near him, and after casting in a few more pebbles he was able to quench his thirst and save his life. Little by little does the trick.	**Narrator 1**: A crow, half-dead with thirst, was desperate for water. **Crow:** I'm thirsty. I want to drink some water. I need to drink some water. **Narrator 2:** Then he came upon a pitcher that once had been full of water, but when he put his beak into the mouth of the pitcher, he found very little water in it. **Narrator 1:** Moreover, he could not reach far enough down to get at it. **Narrator 2:** He tried and he tried, but finally he had to give up in despair. **Crow:** I need that water! How can I reach the water?…I got it! I could use these pebbles lying all around me to help. **Narrator 1:** So he collected as many pebbles as he could find, and he dropped them… (*Sound effects. Stones knocking together*) **Narrator 2:** One by one. **Narrator 1:** …into the pitcher. **Narrator 2:** Until at last, he saw the water rising up, and he was able to quench his thirst and save his life. **Crow:** Luckily for me… little by little does the trick.

In adapting the *Just So Stories,* I used a variation of this technique, to give voice to a character who is implied in the telling of many of these tales but who remains silent in them. "How the Whale Got His Throat," for instance, begins like this:

"In the sea, once upon a time, O my Best Beloved, there was a Whale, and he ate fishes."

"O my Best Beloved" clearly implies that the story is addressed to a child. In my scripted version (Table 3), the narrator assumes the role of a parent telling the story to a child, who becomes an additional character in the drama, responding to and questioning the narrator.

Table 3. "How the Whale Got His Throat"

Original	Script
In the sea, once upon a time, O my Best Beloved, there was a whale, and he ate fishes. He ate the starfish and the garfish, and the crab and the dab, and the plaice and the dace, and the skate and his mate, and the mackereel and the pickereel, and the really truly twirly-whirly eel. All the fishes he could find in all the sea he ate with his mouth--so! Till at last there was only one small fish left in all the sea, and he was a small 'stute fish, and he swam a little behind the whale's right ear, so as to be out of harm's way. Then the whale stood up on his tail and said, 'I'm hungry.' And the small 'stute fish said in a small 'stute voice, 'Noble and generous cetacean, have you ever tasted Man?' 'No,' said the whale. 'What is it like?' 'Nice,' said the small 'stute fish. 'Nice but nubbly.' 'Then fetch me some,' said the whale, and he made the sea froth up with his tail.	**Narrator:** Once upon a time, in the sea, (O My Best Beloved) there was a whale, and he ate fishes… **Child:** What kind of fishes did he eat? **Narrator:** Well, he ate the starfish and the garfish, and the crab and the dab, and the plaice and the dace, and the skate and his mate, and the mackerel and the pickerel, and the really truly twirly-whirly eel. **Child:** All the fishes in all the sea? **Narrator:** Yep, he ate them all. With his mouth so! Till at last there was only one small fish left in all the sea. And he was a small 'stute fish… **Child:** What is a 'stute fish. **Narrator:** It means he was smart… And he swam a little behind the whale's right ear. Can you guess why? **Child:** Because he was afraid the whale would eat him? **Narrator:** Just so. Then the whale stood up on his tail and said, 'I'm hungry.' And the small 'stute fish said in a small 'stute voice… **'Stute fish:** Noble and generous cetacean; have you ever tasted Man? **Whale:** No, what is it like? **'Stute fish:** Nice. Nice but nubbly. **Whale:** Then fetch me some.

Sometimes the use of multiple narrators can add interest to the story, at the same time creating additional roles, thereby increasing the number of participants who can take part in a piece. At other times, narrators can be an unnecessary distraction that can be eliminated from a script. In the short story, "A Man With No Eyes," for instance, the narrator was cut entirely by having the main character take over the narrator function (See Table 4 for an excerpt).

Table 4. "A Man With No Eyes"

Original	Script
The air was rich with spring. The sun was warm and bright on the sidewalk. Mr. Parsons stood there in front of his hotel. He noted the *clack-clack* as the sight-less man came nearer, and he felt a sudden sort of pity for all blind people.	*(Parsons comes downstage from hotel. Bensons enters, stage left, tapping a cane. Both men wear sunglasses.)* **Parsons:** *(Talking to himself).* What a nice day! I just love spring. The sun is warm. The birds are singing. What could be better? *(Parsons looks in the direction of the tapping.)*

To summarize, successful readers' theater requires interesting, well-written scripts at a level appropriate to the readers. By following a few basic principles and exercising imagination, teacher and students can collaborate in adapting their favorite materials (or teachers can indulge their secret ambitions as writers).

Dialect Coach

In professional theater or film, the dialect coach helps actors assume particular accents so that they can convincingly perform characters from different regions or cultures. In readers' theater for English language learners, the teacher's job is not really to teach accents but merely to enable readers to perform their parts in a way that is comprehensible. This may entail accent reduction for some readers as they work on segmentals (the individual sounds or phonemes) that may give them trouble and the prosodic features of spoken English (rhythm, stress and intonation). Because readers' theater provides learners an opportunity to work on pronunciation issues through the medium of a written script, it also affords opportunities to raise awareness of sound-spelling correspondence (which facilitates word recognition) and to work on phrasing (which is associated with syntactic processing) both of which are essential to reading with comprehension.

In the readers' theater class that inspired this article, students exhibited varying

levels of fluency in oral reading assessments conducted on the first day of class, with no student able to read without miscues. As most of the miscues seemed to revolve around issues related to vowels and digraphs, I decided to devote several early classes to pronunciation and sound-spelling relationships.

We began with a review of the English vowel system, the objective being to raise awareness with regard to roughly 15 different vowel sounds of spoken English along with the apparently random spelling variations by which these sounds can be realized. Students were introduced to the International Phonetic Alphabet in conjunction with pronunciation models[5] exemplifying each of 15 vowel sounds (Appendix 1 represents the student handout used for this purpose). There was no expectation that students would learn the phonetic alphabet, rather it was used merely as a visual point of focus to reinforce the subtle differences between various vowel sounds. In addition to the time allocated for this exercise in the classroom, I prepared a QuickTime video that introduced each phonetic symbol, one by one, with a recording of its pronunciation and sample words exemplifying the vowel (phoneme) of focus. Students were to download the video clip from a department website and review it throughout the first couple of weeks outside of class.

This initial pronunciation work was followed up with some limited instruction revolving around sound-spelling correspondence (again with a focus on vowels) in order to demonstrate to students that despite the apparent absence of any predictable correspondence, English spelling does in fact exhibit some striking regularities. During this phase of the course, beginning during the second week, I introduced a handful of phonics-type generalizations, which have fairly high utility by virtue of their general reliability (meaning that they tend to work with a 75% or greater frequency). Students received a handout (Appendix 2) with a summary of the most useful of these generalizations based on an analysis by Johnston (2001). The handout

consisted of six broad generalizations. These were introduced, explained, and illustrated with numerous examples, one broad generalization at a time over the course of the next two weeks. Discussion of each generalization was then followed up with a task involving classification of words within a course reading that illustrated a given regularity (See Appendix 3 for a sample task from the course).

Up until this point, my work as a "dialect coach" involved pronunciation of vowel phonemes and general awareness-raising regarding how vowel phonemes are typically encoded in written English, emphasizing those patterns that tend to occur with relatively high frequency. Later, as students assumed their roles and began to prepare for performance by rehearsing their scripts, my primary function (and that of my teaching assistants) became to coach readers in a holistic way on prosodic aspects of pronunciation (stress, rhythm, intonation) and to work on pushing students towards an optimum level of speed, appropriate phrasing, and an expressive style. The primary mode of instruction was modeling. It worked like this. In the early phases, a coach sat with a group and read each character's part, breaking each part into short phrases, which the character repeated after the coach. The process was then repeated, with the coach selecting progressively longer passages for readers to repeat until readers were able to approach a level of fluency that satisfied the coach. Then the groups practiced independently, striving for continual improvement. Readers observed to have difficulties with their parts, or portions thereof, were intensively coached, one-on-one, until their performances came up to the level of their peers in the group. Practice performances were periodically video-recorded, so students could observe their progress, a process, which they seemed to find very entertaining and motivating.

Although there was no expectation that students should memorize their scripts, I did want students to become less attached to their scripts as we moved more towards performance mode. As an approximation of the skill of looking up from reading to

make eye contact with an audience, another reading technique that students practiced was the "peek and speak" technique. In this exercise, students were taught to glance at a phrase, read it silently, hold it in memory, and then look up and say it, before glancing at the next phrase. Students worked towards developing their abilities to handle progressively longer passages of text in this way.

Of all of the roles that the teacher plays in readers' theater, that of "dialect coach," or less fancifully perhaps, fluency coach, is the most central to the success of readers' theater as a form of reading instruction, going as it does beyond merely pronunciation to touch on the processes that develop reading fluency through repeated reading, with its benefits for the automatizing of word recognition.

Director

Once students have gained some basic skill in reading a script, it is time for the teacher to exercise his or her role as director. The main task of the director is to visualize the stage space and give readers the guidance they will need to present themselves to an audience in a way that is visually interesting and that enables the audience to clearly see and hear the readers. While it might be useful to have some theater background, common sense in combination with a few basic staging guidelines should be enough to get started as a director. I started by teaching some basic stage terminology. Using the audience as the frame of reference, students learned the basic stage locations. Facing the audience, the area of the stage closest to the audience is *downstage* while the area furthest away is *upstage. Center stage*, obviously refers to the very center. The direction to the right of the actor (reader) when he/she is facing the audience is *stage right,* while the opposite direction is *stage left*. Students very quickly learn what the director mean by, "Please enter from stage right," or "Position yourself downstage left."

Once readers know where they are going to be on stage, the director's challenge is to bring them around to an awareness of what they need to do for the benefit of an audience. Quite simply this means facing the audience and speaking loudly enough to be heard at a distance. When readers first begin interacting on stage, they tend to face each other, forgetting the audience and giving it their profiles or even their backs. The basic remedy is to teach the *quarter position*, in which the readers face each other obliquely so that they are also half facing the audience. In the directing phase of readers' theater, it may be necessary to continually remind readers of this basic principle. When readers are in ensembles, they may need to be reminded to arrange themselves so as to maintain the visibility of all participants. Finally, students may need to be reminded not to hide their faces behind their scripts and not to be so wedded to their scripts that they fail to make contact with the other readers, and especially with the audience.

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. Traditional readers' theater did not involve the trappings of "real" theater, which is to say, elaborate settings, props, and movement on stage. Typically, readers simply take their places on chairs or stools, each reader looking up to read his or her part when it is time, and looking down during the interim. This is certainly one way to do it. Anticipating an audience of elementary school children for my university readers, I wanted something a little more energetic, which prompted me to try some simple choreography, and the key to success, I believe, really is simplicity.

In "The Tortoise and the Hare," for instance, the choreographic goal was: 1) to represent the movements of a tortoise and a hare, and 2) to design the path of the two

characters through the performance space. First we determined the path: a loop around the stage from an imagined starting line to a finish line (where two additional characters, an observing giraffe and elephant simply stood). The tortoise's "choreographic task" was to capture the slow motion quality of the tortoise's walk, completing the fixed distance from start to finish in the time that it took to complete the entire script. The hare had to use a rhythmic jog in place with occasional quick turns of the head, following the same course, but completing epicycles as she ran circles around the tortoise. The hare's pace was only marginally faster than the tortoise's, speed being merely indicated by quality of movement and the greater distance covered. The hare had to then, with large stylized movements, stretch out and nap, and finally wake up, stretch, yawn, and dash in panic (just marginally faster than tortoise pace), reaching the finish line just after the tortoise to deliver the moral of the story, "Don't brag about your lightening pace, for slow and steady won the race." The movements of the piece were all quite slow and simple; the challenge for the readers was in achieving a consistent timing for the whole performance.

In "The Grasshopper and the Ants," the grasshopper looked down from a high place (a slightly elevated hearth in the kiva, a special little amphitheater in the elementary school where we performed). The main choreographic challenge was in representing the ants. The frenetic activity of the anthill was depicted by three "ants," who wove figure 8 trajectories past one another to give a sense of industry. Each ant had to stop in turn, face the audience, and deliver her line, before resuming the movement pattern.

Other pieces (e.g., "How the Camel Got His Hump") used only simple but interesting juxtapositions of characters, some standing, others sitting in chairs, with an occasional entrance or exit of a character. Additional visual interest was established by set design.

Set Designer

Traditional readers' theater kept set design to a minimum, often using little more than a chair, stool, or box for the reader to sit on—perhaps a single significant symbolic object relevant to the reading. An interesting background, however, can enhance an audience's experience, and modern multimedia technology makes this a very simple matter indeed.

In the program I have been describing, we used a few images, downloaded from the Internet, organized in the form of PowerPoint slides, and projected via an overhead LCD projector onto a screen behind the readers. My teaching assistant and I assumed major responsibility for set design, primarily because in several attempts at a collaborative approach that included our students, we discovered that they did not seem to have any flair for it, and we were pressed for time. However, a class with even one or two artistically inclined students could make set design a student responsibility.

In our production for an elementary school audience consisting of four of Aesop's fables and two *Just So Stories*, each piece was supported by a colorful (PowerPoint) slide introducing the title of the piece, followed by a series of several or more slides lending visual support to each story. Sometimes these background slides related quite literally to the story. In "How the Whale Got His Throat," for instance, the narrator reels off a list of all the fishes that the whale ate (before he got his baleen throat): "He ate the starfish and the garfish, and the crab and the dab, and the plaice and the dace, and the skate and his mate, and the mackereel and the pickereel, and the really truly twirly-whirly eel." At each mention of a different species, an image of that creature appeared.

For other pieces, an abstract rather than a literal background sufficed. For example, a single image of vertical, gently curving, green lines, wider at the base and tapering

upward, all against a tan background, suggestive of a forest of grass was the sole backdrop for "The Grasshopper and the Ants." On one occasion, images took the place of all but one of the readers. In "The Hare With Many Friends," only the hare appeared on stage. The other readers (a horse, bull, goat, ram, and calf) - unseen, read their parts from behind the projection screen, upon which an image of each animal appeared during that animal's entry into the story.

As I hope the above examples illustrate, set design can be easily accomplished via multimedia techniques and is limited only by availability of equipment, multimedia know-how, and imagination.

Producer

Readers' theater can be integrated in a limited way into almost any reading course, but if it is the basis for an entire course, it is important to produce a show for an audience, independent of the course participants. This gives the readers a reason to work hard in order to put on the best performance that they are capable of. In professional theater and film, the producer's role is to promote and make arrangements for every aspect of the production, preparing it for presentation and managing it during its production run. Of course, every teaching context is different, and the teacher's role as a producer will be more or less formal, more or less complex, depending upon that context.

The readers' theater that inspired this article was developed as a special topics course within a university intensive English program. The audience for one of the productions that came out of the effort was a second grade class at the university's on campus elementary school. The entire program from reading selections to set design was produced with this audience in mind. Producing this show involved arranging for a performance space at the elementary school—the kiva—an intimate, semicircular

space, located in the schools library and media center, with a carpeted, amphitheater style section for seating, and multimedia projection capability. Production management also involved scheduling several rehearsals within the space, once with a small trial audience, and finally scheduling one full-house presentation to an audience of rapt second-graders, their teachers and the media center coordinator. My student performers rose to the occasion; the second grade audience was most delighted; and even the teachers and media center coordinator were impressed with the quality of the production.

A second production, (the final exam of the semester) was a little less grand than the elementary school production. It consisted of several short stories, recast as short plays, performed within our classroom, to a smaller audience of invited guests—friends of class members, intensive program support staff, and available faculty—but with the same attention to multi media set design and performance quality.

Conclusion

While readers' theater has gained a considerable degree of recognition as a tool in L1 literacy instruction at the elementary and middle school level, and has even entered the L2 landscape at the same level, its use in post-secondary L2 contexts seems relatively unexplored, or at least little written about. In this article, I have discussed how readers' theater served as the conceptual foundation for an entire semester's course within a post-secondary intensive English program. The primary purpose of the article has been to share something of the flavor of that course while offering some practical guidance for how to do readers' theater.

My experience with readers' theater gives me no reason to doubt that RT is an enjoyable and worthwhile educational activity in its own right; moreover, reading theory and research both confirm the value of readers' theater as a means of

promoting reading fluency. In the search for ways to facilitate reading fluency that are both effective and engaging, reading teachers should certainly consider adding readers' theater to their pedagogical repertories.

Notes

1. The IELI curriculum, designed to facilitate international students' transition to degree programs in the university, is structured to provide 18 hours of instruction at each of four instructional levels, divided among courses that focus on reading, writing, speaking, listening, and cultural awareness. Each level also makes provisions for a topics course, the focus of which is entirely up to the instructor.

2. "The Hare With Many Friends"

   http://www.aesopfables.com/cgi/aesop1.cgi?srch&fabl/TheHareWithManyFriends

   and

   "The Crow and the Pitcher"

   http://www.aesopfables.com/cgi/aesop1.cgi?srch&fabl/TheCrowandthePitcher2

3. "How the Camel Got His Hump" http://www.online-literature.com/kipling/167/ and "How the Whale Got His Throat" http://www.online-literature.com/kipling/171/

4. Burton Goodman: "More Surprises," and "Sudden Twists" (Jamestown Publishers).

5. Pronunciation models were based on the variety of English spoken by the course instructor, i.e., American English (Midwestern region).

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Appendix 1

Vowel Sounds & Spelling Variations

Symbols	Spelling (examples)
i	w**e** f**ee**t b**ea**t k**ey** bel**ie**ve p**eo**ple sp**ee**d**y**
I	**i**t b**i**t b**ee**n
e	r**a**ce l**a**te r**ai**n gr**ea**t **ei**ght th**ey**
ɛ	b**e**d s**ay**s g**ue**st d**ea**d s**ai**d
æ	b**a**d l**au**gh l**a**dder h**a**t comr**a**de
u	b**oo**t f**oo**d wh**o** m**o**ve d**u**ty t**o** t**oo** tw**o** thr**ou**gh s**ui**t
ʊ	p**u**t f**oo**t c**ou**ld
ʌ	b**u**t t**ou**gh **o**ven c**o**ver d**o**es fl**oo**d
o	b**oa**t g**o** gr**ow** t**oe** **ow**n **o**ver
ɔ	b**ou**ght c**au**ght s**aw** b**a**ll wr**o**ng
ɑ	f**a**ther c**a**r h**o**t p**a**lm h**o**spital
ə	sof**a** **a**lone ros**e**s want**e**d princ**i**pal diffic**u**lt Americ**a**

Diphthongs

Symbols	Spelling (examples)
ɑi	b**i**te s**igh**t b**y** d**ie** h**ei**ght
ɑu	ab**ou**t br**ow**n d**ou**bt
ɔi	b**oy**

Appendix 2

Vowels: Some predictable sound-spelling relationships

1. When a single vowel occurs in a word or syllable with C-V-C pattern (consonant, vowel, consonant) shape, it is always short. There are exceptions, but the generalization is about 90% reliable.

2. In words with the pattern V-C-e, the final e is silent, and the vowel preceding the consonant is long. There are exceptions, but the generalization works fairly well (about 75% of the time) with a, i, and u. It does not work for long e, which tends to be spelled as ee. It works fairly well for o. However, exceptions tend to occur before the letters v, m, n: *give, live, shove, glove, love, come, some, one.*

Short vowels		Long vowel-silent e	
Examples	Phonetic Transcription	Examples	Phonetic Transcription
at, and, cat, back, clap, stand	/æ/	ate, late, grape, shave	/e/
egg, web, tell, went, dress,	/ɛ/	(not useful for long e)	
did, sick, which, bring, gift	/ɪ/	drive, five, smile, thrive	/ɑi/
odd, job, rock, stop, clock	/ɑ/	bone, code, hope	/o/
up, but, fun, luck, truck	/ʌ/	duty, rule, refuse	/u/ /ju/

3. There is an old rule that says: "When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking." This is not quite right, but there are five vowel pairs that are highly regular in this regard. The pronunciation is the same as the name of the first letter in the pair.

Combination	Example	Phonetic Transcription	Approximate Reliability
ay	play, stay, portray	/e/	96%
ai	rain, grain, faint, abstain	/e/	75%
ee	feet, wheel,	/i/	95%
ey	key, monkey	/i/	77%
oa	boat, road	/o/	95%

4. Four other pairs are also very regular, although the pronunciation is not based on the name of the first letter of the pair.

Combination	Example	Phonetic Transcription	Approximate Reliability
aw	saw, lawn	/ɔ/	100%
oy	boy, convoy	/ɔi/	100%
oi	oil, spoil	/ɔi/	100%
au	cause, applause	/ɔ/	79%

5. Some vowel pairs have two or more alternate pronunciations. Knowing this can help a reader make a very good guess at the correct pronunciation.

Combination	Example/ Phonetic	Approximate Reliability	Combination	Phonetic Transcription	Approximate Reliability
ow	snow /o/ how /ɑu/	68% 32%	oo	boot /u/ book /ʊ/	50% 40%
ew	blew /u/ few /iu/	88% 19%	ei	eight /e/ protein /i/	50% 25%

6. There are also some vowel pairs with three or more alternative pronunciations. Making a good guess may be much harder at this point, but here is one more set of combinations.

Combination	Example/ Phonetic	Approximate Reliability	Combination	Example/ Phonetic	Approximate Reliability
ea	seat /i/ head /ɛ/ fear /ɪə(ɾ)/	50% 17% 14%	ou	out /ɑu/ touch /ʌ/ your /ɔr/	43% 18% 7%
ie	field /i/ tied /ɑi/ -	49% 27%	oe	toes /o/ shoes /u/ does /ə/	44% 33% 22%

Appendix 3

Reread the fable, *The Grasshopper and the Ants.* Then look at it again carefully and find words with single short vowel sounds. List them in the column for short vowels. Then find words that fit the long vowel-silent e pattern. List them in the column for long vowels.

The Grasshopper and the Ants

One fine day in winter some Ants were busy drying their store of corn, which had got rather damp during a long spell of rain. Presently up came a Grasshopper and begged them to spare her a few grains, "For," she said, "I'm simply starving." The Ants stopped work for a moment, though this was against their principles. "May we ask," they said, "what you were doing with yourself all last summer? Why didn't you collect a store of food for the winter?"

"The fact is," replied the Grasshopper, "I was so busy singing that I didn't have time."

"If you spent the summer singing," replied the Ants, "you can't do better than spend the winter dancing." And they chuckled and went on with their work.

(Several examples have been listed already to get you started.)

Short vowels		Long vowels-silent e	
ă	ant	ā	
ĕ		ē	
ĭ	in,	ī	
ŏ		ō	
ŭ		ū	

Now read the first paragraph of *How the Whale Got His Throat.* List the words that follow the short vowel and long vowel-silent e rules in this passage.

How the Whale Got His Throat

In the sea, once upon a time, O my Best Beloved, there was a Whale, and he ate fishes. He ate the starfish and the garfish, and the crab and the dab, and the plaice and the dace, and the skate and his mate, and the mackereel and the pickereel, and the really truly twirly-whirly eel. All the fishes he could find in all the sea he ate with his mouth--so! Till at last there was only one small fish left in all the sea, and he was a small 'Stute Fish, and he swam a little behind the Whale's right ear, so as to be out of harm's way. Then the Whale stood up on his tail and said, "I'm hungry." And the small 'Stute Fish said in a small 'stute voice, "Noble and generous Cetacean, have you ever tasted Man?"

Short vowels		Long vowels-silent e	
ă		ā	
ĕ		ē	
ĭ		ī	
ŏ		ō	
ŭ		ū	