

## **Readers Theatre in the Chinese EFL Classroom: Setting the Stage for Oral Performance**

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### **Abstract**

*Readers Theatre is an example of a story dramatization in which readers read a story and transform the story into a script for reading aloud (Sloyer, 1989). The scripts are then performed using only voices and facial expressions. To portray the characters in the story, readers strive for voice flexibility, good articulation, proper pronunciation, and projection. This study was designed to investigate the perceptions of Chinese EFL learners of Readers Theatre as a way to improve their oral English. The participants for this study were PRC students enrolled in a Communication Skills course in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. A survey questionnaire was designed to evaluate learners' reactions to the Readers Theatre activity and the data were also triangulated by the teachers' observations of learners' attitudes and behaviours. The findings from this study showed that a majority of Chinese EFL learners reacted positively to the use of Readers Theatre as a way to enhance their oral English performance. In addition, the RT activity provided the opportunity for Chinese EFL learners to engage in different language use functions such as asking and answering questions, solving problems, expressing their opinions, and arguing and persuading. Readers Theatre is a rewarding language learning experience for Chinese EFL learners as it boosts their confidence in using English in a real communicative context.*

### **1. Introduction**

#### *Drama and Oral Language Development*

One of the main concerns in EFL learning is how to provide learners with "real-life" language experience. Felton et al. (1988) observe that drama allows learners to use language for a wider range of purposes compared to the conventional language lesson in the traditional classroom. They believe that compared to the informational talk in a typical lesson, there is a higher volume of interactional and expressive talk when learners are engaged in drama activities. Through drama, learners are more willing to share their feelings and views with other learners within a secure environment. Needlands (1992) proposes that if the teacher and learners are able to

use drama to create roles and situations, there will be a greater variety of different contexts for talk. In a similar vein, Kao and O'Neill (1998) state that EFL learners need more practice in speaking in different contexts to become powerful speakers. They need also to be able to analyse contexts so that they are able to identify the key elements which will have a major bearing on what is being spoken and how it will be received by the listener. Maley and Duff (1978) also support the use of drama for language development as they feel that involving learners in the negotiation and construction of drama allows them to connect the language they are learning with the world around them. Wilkinson (1988) states that experiential drama exposes learners to the use of language in different contexts and promotes greater abstract thinking on various issues. Rosen and Koziol, Jr. (1990) examined the relationship of drama activities to the improvement of oral communication skills, knowledge, comprehension, and attitudes. Their study showed that drama had a great influence not only on the oral communication skills but also on the self-esteem of learners. Jordan and Harrell (2000) also recognise RT as an effective drama activity for providing authentic speech practice especially in teaching reading fluency (rate, accuracy, phrasing, pitch, stress, and expressiveness) as well as facilitating comprehension for beginning readers. They suggest that providing learners with enjoyable and exciting active reading procedures is important for teaching fluency and comprehension and will eventually increase their interactions with the language (Jordan & Harrell, 2000).

However, Kao (1994) cautions the use of drama in the EFL classroom because not all learners respond positively to the use of drama for learning oral language. Based on her study on the effects of drama on Taiwanese EFL learners, Kao argues that some learners may have bias towards drama as a language learning activity and will feel that having drama lessons is a waste of time. In addition, learners with low self-esteem or poor language proficiency levels could become discouraged by domineering or highly skilled language learners within their group and might remain passive in class. Wagner (1998) also suggests that it is important to study which teacher strategies and interactions in drama lessons are critical to expanding the range and raising the level of oral language development.

In this study, a simpler use of drama which is called Readers Theatre has been adopted to assess the pedagogical impact of RT on Chinese EFL speakers. Readers Theatre (henceforth RT) has been defined in various ways. Routman (1991) defines RT as a script-writing activity and performed for an audience while Shanklin and Rhodes (1989) define RT as a technique that involves turning a story into a script for

reading aloud. On the other hand, Adam (2003) provides a performance slant to RT and defines it as a presentational performance based on principles and techniques of oral interpretation with the purpose to entertain, instruct, and persuade. However, in this study, Sloyer's (1989) definition of RT as a reading interpretative activity is employed.

Readers Theatre is different from conventional drama activities because it does not require full costume, stage sets and memorisation of scripts. The scripts are performed using only voices and facial expressions (Ng, 2003). To implement RT in the classroom, readers first read a story, and then transform the story into a script through negotiations with other group members. The readers then rehearse their scripts by reading aloud their lines paying attention to the way they articulate the words in the script, varying their tone and projecting their voice. They finally perform for an audience by reading aloud from hand-held scripts.

## **2. The Study**

### *2.1 The Research Question*

Although drama script performance has been adopted for use in EFL classrooms in various educational settings, few studies have been conducted to address both its theoretical and pedagogical issues in the Chinese EFL classroom. Thus, the research for this study is guided by the following question:

*“What are the perceptions of Chinese EFL learners of the use of Readers Theatre to improve their oral English?”*

This question is increasingly important in the light of the theoretical underpinnings for EFL teaching and ramifications on the EFL industry.

### *2.2 Methodology*

(a) A survey questionnaire was used to investigate the reactions of Chinese EFL learners towards the RT activity. The survey questionnaire is an efficient tool to gather quantifiable information on a declarative nature (Codo, 2008). It is commonly used in language research to collect information on attitudes of respondents towards a language. The questionnaire survey was conducted immediately after the RT performance. The first part of the survey (see Appendix A) consisted of 10 Likert-scale questions to explicitly elicit students' reactions and experiences towards RT. The second part of the survey questionnaire was designed to examine whether RT has any effect on the oral performance of Chinese EFL learners. To avoid any inbuilt

bias towards RT as a language learning activity, students were merely instructed to freely comment on their RT experiences.

(b) The teacher's observations were also used to triangulate the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) from the survey questionnaire. The teacher jotted down notes and made detailed field notes on students' behaviours and experiences of the RT activity in class.

### 2.3 The Research Setting

The research was conducted at the School of Materials Engineering in Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. The subjects for the study were students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) enrolled in a Communication Skills course. The RT activity was conducted in four classes and each class consisted of twenty students. Students in each class were divided into groups of four or five for the RT activity.

The average age of students was 19 and their TOEFL scores ranged from 450 to 500. The overall objective of the Communication Skills was to improve the oral performance of PRC students to enable them to function in English in the workplace. A description of the Communication Skills course objective is as follows:

*This course is designed to provide students with an understanding of the strategies and skills of professional communication, and prepares students to handle verbal and written communication tasks in various situations. The main focus is on learning through participation in class. Students will learn through a variety of methods such as group discussion, role-play, and simulation.*

It was observed that Chinese EFL students enrolled in the Communication Skills course lacked confidence to speak English in class. As English was not the mother tongue of the students, many were apprehensive of their spoken English. RT was introduced for the first time to enhance the oral performance of students for participation in academic discussions in English.

### 2.4 Classroom Procedures

The RT activity was implemented in the following stages:

Stage	Activity/Task
<b>One:</b> Preparing students for RT	As a way to prepare students for RT, the teacher uses a graded reader, 'Tales from Hans Andersen,' which contains plenty of dialogues for students to practise

	reading aloud. As students practise reading aloud in groups of four or five, the teacher explains the importance of using only the voice elements to vary the pace of reading, tempo, volume, and pitch to make the story 'sound' more interesting and natural.
<b>Two:</b> Introducing the text	The teacher selects a reading passage relevant to class. The teacher conducts a pre-reading activity (questioning, explaining the vocabulary, etc.) to familiarise students with the story.
<b>Three:</b> Writing the script	The teacher provides a scenario (see Appendix B) for the script writing. Students form groups and write a script based on a given scenario given by the teacher. See Sample script by student (Appendix C).
<b>Four:</b> Rehearsing the script	The teacher checks the script and students rehearse the script after approval by the teacher.
<b>Five:</b> Performing the script	Students perform the script in front of the class. A Readers Theatre rubric is used to assess students' performance (see Appendix D). The teacher plays back the recording and encourages students to comment on their peers' performance.

### 3. Data Analysis

The first part of the survey questions was designed to explicitly elicit Chinese EFL learners' attitudes and opinions on the RT activity (see Table 1). The second part of the survey was designed to examine whether RT has any effect on the oral performance of Chinese EFL learners. The theoretical framework for the qualitative analysis was based on the suggestions by Miles and Huberman (1994) which involve three concurrent stages of data analysis:

- (a) editing, segmenting and summarizing of data
- (b) organizing and assembling of data
- (c) coding and memoing.

Students' comments on the RT activity were analysed to investigate whether RT created an impact on students' oral performance. Students' attitudes towards the learning of communicative English were first analysed on an individual basis and each salient attitude towards the use of RT for enhancing oral performance was extracted and displayed. The data were then analysed through my interpretation

and knowledge on communicative competence within the context of EFL learning. The results of the survey questionnaire are tabulated in Table 1.

### 3.1 Chinese EFL Learners' opinion on Readers Theatre

**Table 1: Chinese EFL Learners' opinion on Readers Theatre**

*Note: 1 (disagree), 2 (neutral), 3 (agree)*

Statements	1	2	3
1. The English lesson was more interesting with RT.	9%	3%	88%
2. RT is a good way of learning spoken English.	3%	2%	95%
3. I feel more confident using English through RT.	4%	9%	87%
4. RT is a difficult way of learning English.	73%	11%	16%
5. Writing the script for RT was not difficult.	20%	20%	60%
6. I enjoyed working with my friends in writing and performing RT.	4%	9%	87%
7. I am not confident using English through RT.	68%	14%	18%
8. After watching the performance, I want to improve my English.	4%	10%	86%
9. RT made no difference in the way I learn English.	71%	7%	22%
10. RT has helped me improve my writing skills.	11%	19%	70%

The results of part one of the survey questionnaire show that a majority of Chinese EFL learners displayed positive attitude towards the RT activity. In their responses to the first question, 88% of Chinese EFL learners agreed that the lesson was more interesting with RT. A majority of Chinese EFL learners (95%) also agreed that RT is a good way of learning spoken English. In response to statement 3, 87% of Chinese EFL learners felt they became more confident using English through RT. When asked whether they liked collaborating with others in the RT activity, 87% of Chinese EFL learners said they enjoyed working with their friends in writing and performing RT. It is interesting to note that 86% of Chinese EFL learners were motivated to improve their English after watching their friends perform their scripts. Compared to previous lessons where Chinese EFL learners normally maintained a passive stance in class discussions, the class was lively during the RT activity. In addition, some positive feedback on various phases of the RT activity was elicited through part two of the survey questionnaire (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Categorization of Students' Statements on RT**

Category	Subcategory	Feedback from students
Attitudes towards the RT activity	Writing the script	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the script writing was difficult but enjoyable</li> <li>- interesting because could practice writing</li> <li>- could understand what other students think about the topic</li> <li>- useful because it provided opportunity to talk about a topic applicable to own personal lives</li> </ul>
	Rehearsing the script	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the atmosphere was not dull</li> <li>- allowed students to speak English as if they were on stage</li> </ul>
	Performing the script	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- enjoyed the activity as other script performances were interesting</li> <li>- motivated individual students to be good English speakers after hearing other group members perform.</li> <li>- fun to watch other groups' performance</li> </ul>

### 3.2 The effects of RT on oral performance

As mentioned earlier, the research study also sought to examine students' perception of RT on students' oral performance. Based on part two of the survey questionnaire, some positive statements on the effects of RT on students' oral performance were reported as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Effects of RT on oral performance**

The effect of RT on oral performance	Linguistic Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- helped to improve fluency in speaking</li> <li>- provided opportunity to practise English pronunciation</li> <li>- allowed time to practise spoken English</li> <li>- students became bold in speaking English through the performance</li> <li>- allowed students the opportunity to communicate with other classmates in English</li> <li>- learnt phrases for casual conversation</li> </ul>
	Pragmatic Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- learnt about the importance of pitch, speed, and volume in communication</li> <li>- good way to learn communicating with others</li> <li>- learnt how to negotiate in English while collaborating with other group members on the script-writing task</li> </ul>

The teacher also observed that students were actively engaged in using English to communicate their personal opinions and ideas during script negotiations. Based on the script produced, a majority of EFL learners were able to use linguistic structures and features of spoken text such as pause and emphasis to adjust their speaking and listening to portray the characters in the script. As students worked on their scripts, they made multiple negotiations in English to decide which lines to keep, what to edit and revise, and how lines should be said. The following is an illustration of how students applied their knowledge of English in negotiating a script:

*Student 6: How many more months do the patient have for him to live on?*

*Student 7: Should we state that the patient will live only for only six months?*

*Student 8: Six months is too long. Maybe we should state that the patient unconscious for six months.*

*Student 9: If the student is unconscious, do we still want to kill him? If he is unconscious, the doctor cannot kill him.*

*Student 6: What about brain dead? We can say that the patient is brain dead.*

The negotiation of meaning pushed students to use words or expressions that are fairly close to authentic speech (Jordan & Harrell, 2000). In addition, students' vocabulary was reinforced through the negotiations of script (Kao, 1994). As students collaborated to complete their script, they also engaged in different language use functions such as asking and answering questions, solving problems, expressing their opinions, and arguing and persuading (Kao, 1994). They also learnt to experiment with vocabulary, register, and speech patterns as they took on different roles (Wager, 1998). As a result, students gained tremendous confidence in using communicative English. On the whole, RT enabled Chinese EFL students to develop their spoken English through negotiations of the script.

Several encouraging comments on the effects of RT on oral performance were also reported by individual students as shown below:

(Note: Minor editing was done by the teacher to retain authenticity of materials).

*Acting out the script is an effective way of improving spoken English.*

A Chinese male EFL learner felt the RT activity was an effective method to improve his oral English.

Student 1

I think this activity was one of the good way to improve our spoken English because we could find many new phrases or expressions that are casual (conversational English). Also I felt I could improve my fluency also.

*RT helps to improve English pronunciation.*

Another Chinese EFL learner thinks the RT helps to improve her English pronunciation.

Student 2

I enjoyed this activity because I could write the script and also act. I think it's good for us to improve our English skills like writing or speaking. We have to practice the pronunciation more, so this activity is good. If I have an opportunity to try this activity again, I want to speak more clearly. I had a very good time.

*RT motivates students to improve their oral English after watching their friends perform.*

A Chinese EFL learner was inspired to improve her English after watching the RT performance.

Student 3

After I watch my friends perform, I thought they are very good English speakers. I want to be a good English speaker too.

*RT helps student overcome their nervousness in public speaking.*

Another Chinese student who was involved in the RT activity for the first time commented that the activity has helped her overcome her nervousness when speaking in front of other students.

Student 4

I really enjoyed this activity. Because other groups' scripts were very interesting! Also, I was surprised everyone can speak English well. I want to do activities such as this. I am often nervous when I perform in front of everyone. So I want to get used to performing in front of everyone.

*The RT activity provides opportunities to practise spoken English.*

One male Chinese student agreed that he had lots of opportunities to speak in class as a result of the RT activity.

Student 5

I really enjoyed his activity because speaking English is so interesting for me. But sometimes it is difficult for me to express my ideas in English. So I need a lot of times to practice speaking English. That is why this activity is important for me.

However, it was observed that not all Chinese EFL learners reacted favourably to the RT activity. Some Chinese learners were initially resistant to the RT activity because they had not been exposed to the use of drama in language teaching. In particular, some Chinese EFL learners who lacked confidence in their oral English tended to be passive during the negotiation of scripts. Several students also experienced stage fright when rehearsing their scripts as their confidence in oral English was extremely low. However, with the encouragement of the teacher, the students gradually learnt to overcome their fears of speaking before an audience. In addition, some EFL learners did not have the linguistic ability to produce a well-written script. As a result, the teacher had to proofread and edit students' scripts several times before they were ready to perform.

#### **4. Discussion**

It has been documented that Chinese students, inherently influenced by their Confucian heritage, tend to experience difficulty in oral English, in particular, the ability to express honest opinions and ideas within small groups and interactions with teachers (Holmes, 2005). However, the results of this study showed that as the performance of scripts involved all aspects of language, the RT activity provided Chinese EFL learners the opportunity to acquire oral English language in a real communicative context. The collaborative features of RT enabled Chinese EFL learners to be more confident in using English to communicate their feelings and thoughts in a group setting. As students collaborated to produce a script, they also took ownership of their own learning and were intrinsically involved in developing dialogue to ensure that an original script could be produced. Compared to regular lessons, there was a higher volume of interactional and expressive talk when students were engaged in the RT activity as they were more willing to share their feelings and views with other members within a secure environment. The results of this study also showed that a majority of Chinese EFL learners perceived the RT activity to be a rewarding learning experience as it provided them the opportunity to use words and expressions that were appropriate and relevant to their daily contexts. The rehearsals before the actual performance also provided students with constant learning reinforcement of vocabulary and sentence constructions. This allowed them to transfer their procedural knowledge of English into automated knowledge.

Although several Chinese learners encountered some difficulties at different phases of the RT activity, in general, a majority of students were able to write an original

script and performed realistically for an audience. It was observed that a majority of the students were able to interpret the story creatively and with depth. Most of the groups were also able to deliver a scripted performance although some groups needed more time to work on their scripts. Although students had no previous experiences in RT, the teacher was pleasantly surprised to see them reading aloud their lines enthusiastically and paying attention to the way they articulate the words in the script. Some groups also thrilled the audience with their performances because they were able to vary their tones and project their voices to make their characters come alive. Based on the RT rubric (Appendix D), most groups were able to obtain a score of 3 in terms of knowledge, presentation, voice projection, and overall performances. This is quite an achievement for the PRC students as they had no previous experiences with RT. It was also energising for the teacher to observe students write and perform their scripts knowing that they were holistically involved in the process of using English to perform various communicative functions.

## **5. Conclusion**

RT provides richness and energy in the EFL classroom because students are experientially involved in performing a piece of literature. As a result, they become engaged and develop a sense of investment in the lesson because they are not only merely performing an academic assignment but also learning how to use the English language to communicate their ideas on a topic relevant to their lives. In order to carry out RT successfully in the classroom, sufficient experience in conducting group activity is necessary. The success of the activity initially depends on the teacher's clear instructions to the students. The teacher needs to ensure that every student is involved by getting students to create sufficient characters relating to the topic. The teacher also needs to include the role of a narrator and stress the importance of a good narrator in setting the atmosphere of the play. A narrator can present the topic or theme for the script. For instance, for a script performance about conflicts, the narrator can provide the following introduction to the performance:

*Have you ever been involved in a conflict? What can you do to resolve a conflict? Today, our Readers Theatre will tell you more about conflict.*

The teacher should also allow students sufficient time to rehearse and revise their script. The teacher should allow students flexibility on roles in case they do not work out. In addition, students should be free to approach the teacher should they encounter any problems in pronunciation, tone, stress, etc. The teacher should also note that there could be limitations to using RT in the Chinese EFL classroom especially when students have no familiarity with theatre as a genre. Some students

will not feel comfortable with the expressive nature of RT. As mentioned earlier, some degrees of initial inhibitions were observed among several students during the RT activity because they felt embarrassed in acting out their scripts. The application of Readers Theatre techniques should be introduced within the framework of Chinese EFL educational settings where almost all of the directors, performers, and audience consist of Chinese speakers who study or have studied English as a foreign language. In addition, the benefits of comprehension, cooperation, and responsibility should be taken into consideration more when Readers Theatre is taught in Chinese EFL classroom settings. In the case of Chinese students performing RT as part of English learning, it would be advisable to instruct them to decrease the speed of the performance. However, despite the limitations, RT has the potential to become an innovative teaching approach to motivate not only Chinese EFL learners but also other EFL learners in the learning of communicative English.

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### Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire on Readers Theatre

<b>Part 1: Tick the appropriate statement</b>				
<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>
1. The English lesson was more interesting with RT.				
2. RT is a good way of learning spoken English.				
3. I will feel more confident using English through RT.				
4. RT is a difficult way of learning English.				
5. Writing the script for RT was not difficult.				
6. I enjoyed working with my friends in writing and performing RT.				
7. I am not confident using English through RT.				
8. After watching the performance, I want to improve my English.				
9. RT made no difference in the way I learn English.				
10. RT has helped me improve my writing skills.				
<b>Part 2: Please write in English any other comments about the activity.</b>				
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### Appendix B: Problem Scenario for the RT Activity

*A male patient is afflicted with brain tumour, a terminal disease, and is now lying in bed in great agony in a hospital. The doctor is now advising his family members to prepare for the worst, stating that the patient has at most three months to live. The patient's brother is now discussing the possibility of terminating the life of the patient with the doctor and other family members.*

**Instructions:** Write an original script to portray the situation as described above.

### Appendix C: A Sample of a Students' Script

#### Scene 1

**Narrator:** This story happened in a hospital. A few days ago, a patient, Chao Ming had been admitted into the hospital and was diagnosed with cancer. The surgeon, Doctor Chen is now advising Wang Da (Chao Ming's brother), on the patient's condition.

**Wang Da:** Doctor, Doctor, how's my brother?

**Dr. Chen:** I'm sorry. I had tried my best but there's little I can do.

**Wang Da:** What do you mean?

**Dr. Chen:** The cancer cells have spread to other parts of his body. There's not much I can do. Be prepared for the worst. He has at most three months to live.

**Wang Da:** Oh, my God!

#### Scene 2

**Narrator:** Lying in his bed, Chao Ming is moaning in intense pain.

**Chao Ming:** Brother, help me. I feel pain all over, like thousands of worms biting me. Please let me die.

**Wang Da:** Don't be silly. You'll be fine. Please trust me.

**Chao Ming:** Please let me die in silence than in pain. Help me, brother!

#### Scene 3

**Narrator:** In Doctor Chen's office.

**Dr. Chen:** According to your brother's wish, he wants me to end his life. But I need your consent.

**Wang Da:** Oh, what should I do? Kill him? I can't bear to do it. He's my only brother. I can't let him go. But I can't bear to see him in pain either. What should I do?

*\* Some editing on the part of the teacher for the purpose of clarity and readability*

#### Appendix D: Rubric for Readers Theater

Source: [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/.../education/lesson20\\_organizer1.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/.../education/lesson20_organizer1.html) (Retrieved 4 November 2009)

AREA	1	2	3	4
<b>Knowledge</b>	Students do not interpret the story appropriately.	Interprets the story appropriately.	Interprets the story imaginatively and appropriately.	Interprets the story creatively and with depth.
<b>Presentation</b>	Students do not seem to be aware of what they should be doing at all.	Students do not appear confident about what they are doing.	Students appear to be fairly prepared.	Group is well prepared.
<b>Voice</b>	Hard to understand.	Not so well articulated.	Well articulated. Easy to understand.	Entire skit was clear, concise, and well articulated.
<b>Projection</b>	Use no expression or inappropriate expression.	Use some expression in their voices.	Use expression in their voices, loud and soft.	Great expression in their voices, loud and soft.
<b>Overall Performance</b>	No enthusiasm	Some enthusiasm	Very enthusiastic	Great enthusiasm