

Improving Oral Skills through Readers Theatre among Foreign Learners

Roselina Johari Md. Khir¹, Murina Pawanteh², and John Stephens³

UOW University

e-mail: roseline.k@uow.edu.my¹, pmurina@uow.edu.my², john.m@uow.edu.my³

Article received: Mar 2, 2025

Article accepted: May 19, 2025

Article published: June 23, 2025

Cite this article (APA): Md. Khir, R. J., Pawanteh, M., & Stephens, J. (2025). Improving oral skills through readers theatre among foreign learners. *Jurai Sembah*, 6(1), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.37134/juraisembah.vol6.1.1.2025>

Abstract

Drama with its dialogue provide a dynamic form in which language and oral skills can be introduced and reinforced. Readers Theatre (RT) is an example of a story dramatization in which readers are given drama scripts to portray characters from the text they have read. As they portray a character, readers strive for good articulation, proper pronunciation, and projection. Our study was designed to investigate the following research questions: Do learners have positive experiences using Readers Theatre to improve their oral skills? Does Readers Theater give learners more confidence to speak? 40 foreign learners from an Asian University Summer Program joined the Language Cultural Program organized by the International Students Centre at the University Malaya from 4th- 20th August 2018. Initially we involved them in role play and improvisations before giving them a Readers Theatre script based on a local historical play. At the end of the program, they were required to give a 15-minute public performance. The participants were evaluated for their oral communication skills at the first meeting through an oral task and at the end of their program through their RT performance by a panel of three experts. The findings from our studies show that RT helped in the fluency, expression and oral skills of English Foreign Learners as they began to feel confident in using their oral skills by varying the pitch and volume to portray the characters. RT also boosted their confidence in handling spoken dialogue.

Keywords: confidence, foreign learners, oral skills, readers theatre

Introduction

This study was carried out to examine the extent Reader's Theatre could be used as a strategy to improve oral skills and enhance the fluency of English Foreign Learners (EFL) in a positive and amiable environment while giving them cultural experience. Reader's theatre (RT) is a story dramatization of a script whereby participants read as they portray the characters. Participation in the Readers Theatre does not need memorization of dialogue, hence taking away the pressure from participants. Berlinger (2000:1) has recognized the benefits of scripted dialogues in encouraging English expressions where students can actively acquire the vocabulary, idioms and grammar. This is particularly applicable to learners who are generally aware of their handicap in English oral proficiency and are looking for a secure starting point. Reader's theatre is one such method which can be incorporated, not just in a classroom but anywhere, relatively easily and cheaply. It does not require props, costumes, or sets like other forms of theatre production. The actors also remain in the same place throughout the performance so there is not a need to plan the movement of the actors on a stage. All rehearsal time is dedicated to making sure that the script is read with the proper expression, intonation, and at the proper rate so the story is told effectively. Martinez, M., Roser, N.L & Strecker S, (1998) describe RT as an interpretive

activity in which readers use their voices to bring characters to life. It requires no sets, costumes, props, or memorized lines. The basic principle of Readers Theatre is that a text is read aloud in small pieces at a time by a number of different readers. It thus combines oral and written language in a dramatic way. The performer's goal is to read a script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the actions. This study was designed to investigate the following research question:

1. Do English Foreign Learners gain positive experiences using Readers Theatre to improve their oral and communication skills?
2. Are they more confident in speaking after their involvement in RT lessons?

Literature

A number of studies had been done on using RT as a tool to engage learners, improve fluency in reading and aid in comprehension. Reader's Theatre is about making the scripts come alive. Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, (1998) said that the practice of making the script come alive make students able to develop or improve their oral reading fluency. Rehearsals of the readers' theatre text carried out particularly help to aid fluency development. Each day students are given time in class to rehearse their scripts and prepare for their performance. By reading and rereading the texts they increase their chances of becoming fluent readers.

According to Mraz, M., Nichols, W., Caldwell, S., Beisley, R., Sargent, S., & Rupley, W. (2013) using a text that is appropriate for the reader is important to nurturing fluency. They added that students should have texts that are relatively easy. Important point is that scripts would not appear daunting because students do not have to read the entire text alone. Parts for which each student is responsible are intermingled with parts for which other students are responsible, affording students frequent breaks in oral reading.

Another study by Clark, Morrison, and Wilcox (2009) looked at the effect of reader's theatre on the developmental process of fluency, particularly the rate and prosody among selected fourth grade students. It was presented as a multi-case study. The results of this study support the hypothesis that the prosodic elements of reading directly influence a reader's ability to understand text. Though pace is important, the skill of prosody is vital to truly fluent reading.

The influence reader's theatre had on comprehension was also carried out was investigated by Kabilan and Kamaruddin (2010). Students had stated that the English readings were difficult for them to understand and after RT was introduced, they found that after engaging with their texts creatively, they were able to relate better.

Methodology

We started the program with a formative assessment. Students were and generally and briefly assessed during drama games and role play to find out the level of proficiency of speaking, and the extent of their vocabulary. Using the results of the first role play, we reinforced what students lacked or needed in the role played and improvisations in the days ahead. Students were encouraged to use the language in discussions of their acting and delivery.

In the 2nd week, a long script based on a local historical theme was distributed to them. Vocabulary was pre-taught. Students read the passages individually and discussed their responses to the story. After students had gained sufficient background knowledge of the story line, they were put in various groups of 10. They were then given the task of rehearsing their roles. They were taught the techniques of acting and expression. A public performance of twenty minutes was set.

In the 3rd week, in between rehearsals, in order to introduce them to the culture, and for them to enjoy the class, we taught them four basic Malay traditional dances, the *inang*, the *joget*, *zapin* and *ronggeng* and the art of Malay defense, *silat*. We incorporated them in the Reader's Theatre performance.

Data was collected from:

1. Questionnaire survey of learners' reaction towards the use of RT
2. Audience responses on their performance.

The Questionnaire Survey

A questionnaire survey after the RT activity. Students completed a questionnaire, which consisted of ten 5-Likert-scale questions. The questions were designed to explicitly elicit students' opinion of RT. We also designed five open - ended questions for the audience to provide us with their observations in using RT in the classroom.

In an attempt to answer the research question on whether learners have positive experiences using RT to improve their oral skills. Student journal entries during the course were examined and compared with entries made on the day RT was introduced. This will be done to see if RT has made any significant impression in their learning experience. The data was summative, showing evidence of learning.

Audience Response

Students were assessed during their presentation/performance:

Can the student be generally understood?

Is the range of vocabulary appropriate/increased?

Does the speaker keep interaction going among each other during the performance?

Are the sounds clear?

Is the outcome successful?

Results

To answer our research question on whether learners had positive experiences using RT to improve their oral skills, data from Student journal entries at the end of the course were examined and compared with entries made on the day the program started. This was done to see if RT made any significant impression in their learning experience. Although journals from them did not have details, they were honest and had some reflections. Students' journal entries showed that there were significant impressions of RT experience for some students. Example of one:

In this class, at first almost everyone is very shy to speak. So, the atmosphere of the class is not very active. The teacher makes jokes and games we did in class change some of us. We can speak what we want. My classmates become brave and act the performance very well. The class is not dull.

In addition, information from learner's journal was also cross-validated by the questionnaire survey. Only 40 out of 44 students completed the questionnaires (Table 1). The main focus of the questionnaire was to determine students' reactions to RT. In their responses to the first question 62.5% strongly agreed that the lesson was more interesting with RT. A majority of 85% strongly agreed that RT is a good way of learning spoken English. Whether they were more confident using English through RT, 70% strongly agreed. To see whether they liked collaborative work, which RT is, 50% strongly agreed, 45% agreed and 5% is neutral. However, they all did prefer working with friends rather than on their own. It is interesting to note that 95 were further motivated to improve their English after performing RT.

Table 1. Survey on Readers Theatre

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	The English lesson was more interesting with RT	0%	0%	0%	37.5%	62.5%
2	RT is a good way of learning Spoken English	0%	0%	0%	25%	85%
3	I feel more confident using English through RT	0%	0%	5%	25%	70%
4	RT is a hard way of learning English	62.5%	37.5%	0%	0%	0%
5	I enjoyed working with my friends performing RT	0%	0%	5%	45%	50%
6	I am not confident using English through RT	70%	25%	5%	0%	0%
7	After performing RT, I feel motivated to further improve my English	0%	0%	0%	5%	95%
8	RT has made no difference to me in learning speaking in English	65%	25%	5%	5%	0%
9	I prefer learning on my own than performing RT in group	62.5%	37.5%	0%	0%	0%
10	RT has improved my Listening skill	0%	0%	5%	45%	50%

1 (strongly disagree); 2 (disagree); 3 (neutral); 4 (agree); 5 (strongly agree)

Thus, we had proven that Reader's Theatre enhanced the oral skills of EFL learners as they learned to interpret characters and communicate meaning through voice (volume, pitch, stress) facial expressions and gestures. They were instructed to be aware of reading loud enough for all to hear, reading the words accurately and like the character might have said it, changing their voices to show such emotions as excitement, wonder, love, or shock. A lot of attention was also given to articulation. On top of that, they were taught the basics of acting through the portrayal of characters to engage the audience and to be effective communicators. Students also learned to deliver smoother speech, with little pauses. This is mostly due to the repetitive rehearsals of the script which then increased their comprehension as well as fluency.

Audience response affirmed the success. The story was presented clearly as members found it to be an enjoyable evening. They noticed that there was strong eye contact from the readers. They did focus on making the patterns of stress and intonation of the English language. Articulation was still a problem for some. Audience was impressed by their showcase of Malay dance performances by all of them and a *silat* by the duo.

Discussion

The implementation of Reader's Theatre (RT) as a pedagogical tool in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom yielded valuable insights into its impact on learners' oral skills and confidence. Drawing from both qualitative and quantitative data, this discussion explores the experience of the learners through journal entries and structured surveys, highlighting the shifts in learner attitudes, oral performance, and collaborative engagement over the course of the program.

The initial data collected from student journals provide an intimate glimpse into their emotional and cognitive journey throughout the RT process. These journals, though brief, capture personal transformations in classroom dynamics and individual self-expression. At the outset, learners were hesitant to speak. The classroom environment was subdued, shaped by learners' anxiety or lack of confidence. However, journal reflections suggested that the structured yet playful activities of RT, including humorous scripts and performance games, dismantled barriers to participation. Students began to voice their thoughts more freely, actively engaging in group performances. One student remarked on the class transformation—from a space of hesitation to one of bravery and enthusiasm—indicating the emotional and social growth nurtured through RT activities.

These subjective experiences were substantiated by quantitative data from the survey responses. A significant number of students (62.5%) strongly agreed that English lessons became more interesting with RT, and an even higher percentage (85%) viewed RT as an effective method for learning spoken English. These results point to a shift in perception: English lessons were no longer rigid or routine but dynamic and performative. Learners interpreted RT as a medium that broke the monotony of conventional language drills, offering them a more engaging alternative.

Another essential component was self-confidence. Approximately 70% strongly agreed that they felt more confident using English through RT. This is critical in EFL contexts where learners often struggle with performance anxiety and fear of making mistakes. The repetitive practice embedded in RT scripts, combined with peer support and rehearsal, likely played a role in reducing language anxiety. The structure of RT—focusing on prepared scripts rather than spontaneous speech—provided a semi-controlled environment where students could experiment with language, intonation, and delivery, while still feeling secure in the predictability of the text.

While the data overall showed positive effects, it is important to acknowledge areas where students expressed reservations. For instance, 62.5% disagreed with the notion that RT is a hard way of learning English, suggesting that most learners found the method accessible. However, this does not mean it was without its challenges. The success of RT relies heavily on consistent rehearsal, attention to articulation, and emotional expression, which may be demanding for some students. Despite this, the overwhelmingly positive reception suggests that any difficulty was perceived as productive struggle rather than discouraging hardship.

Collaborative dynamics also formed a central theme in this investigation. The survey revealed that 50% of the students strongly enjoyed working with peers, while 45% agreed to the same. This suggests that RT facilitated social bonding and cooperative learning. Peer collaboration in rehearsals and performances not only fostered a sense of community but also provided learners with authentic audiences for feedback and encouragement. Interestingly, a large portion (62.5%) indicated a preference for group learning over individual learning, which challenges traditional EFL paradigms that often overemphasize solitary practice. RT shifted the learning model toward shared responsibility, mutual learning, and peer support.

Motivation emerged as a strong outcome of the RT intervention. An impressive 95% of learners felt motivated to continue improving their English after participating in RT. This internal drive may be attributed to the visibility of their own progress and the positive reinforcement from both teachers and peers. Motivation is a core element in language acquisition, and these findings suggest that RT contributed significantly to nurturing learners' intrinsic interest in the language.

Despite the broad success, not all responses were unanimously positive. For example, 65% strongly disagreed that RT made no difference in their learning, affirming its impact; however, a small minority remained neutral or only somewhat convinced. This suggests that individual learner differences—such as personality, language background, or learning style—may influence how RT is experienced. Some students might have preferred more conventional forms of instruction, or they may have struggled with the performative aspects due to introversion or stage anxiety.

Another notable aspect is the development of listening skills. According to the survey, 50% strongly agreed and 45% agreed that their listening improved. This aligns with the RT structure, which requires attentive listening during peer performances, repeated exposure to the same script, and the need to follow cues during group rehearsals. Through this practice, learners become more attuned to stress patterns, pronunciation, and spoken rhythm.

In terms of technical improvement, RT pushed students to refine their articulation, modify vocal dynamics, and perform appropriate facial expressions and gestures. These multimodal elements of communication are often neglected in traditional EFL instruction, yet are essential to natural spoken interaction. RT served as a bridge between linguistic knowledge and paralinguistic expression. Students practiced modulating their tone to express emotions like surprise, anger, or joy—an essential skill in spoken communication that enhances fluency and pragmatics.

Performance outcomes further solidified RT's success. Observations from an external audience indicated that the learners were able to convey their stories with clarity. The audience noted strong eye contact, rhythmic stress and intonation, and engaging physical presentation. These are markers of oral fluency and audience awareness, both of which are often difficult to develop through textbook learning. Despite minor articulation challenges for some, the overall presentation was well-received, signaling successful internalization of the RT training. The integration of cultural performances like Malay dance and silat added richness to the learning experience and connected language acquisition with cultural identity.

In conclusion, the use of Reader's Theatre in the EFL classroom effectively enhanced students' oral communication skills. Data from journals and surveys indicated that learners gained confidence, improved their articulation and listening, and developed greater motivation toward English learning. Through collaboration,

practice, and performance, students were able to translate written text into expressive spoken language, bridging the gap between comprehension and production. RT proved to be more than a pedagogical technique; it became a medium through which learners discovered their voice in English.

Conclusion

Although Mraz, M. (et al) (2013) proposed that students should have texts that are relatively easy and well within their range, we chose quite a heavy verse drama with a historical theme as we wanted to challenge these EFL learners while providing a cultural experience. The findings from our studies show that RT helped in the fluency, expression and improve the oral skills of English Foreign Learners as they began to feel confident as they varied their pitch and volume to portray the characters. RT had boosted their confidence in handling spoken dialogue.

It is highly recommended that RT be given teachers' highest consideration in improving oral communication. All the methods used that RT integrates such as modeling, echo reading, buddy reading, choral reading, and repeated reading will give non-English speakers the confidence for them to engage in oral communication. It is our firm belief that RT has a great potential in language education. Indeed, RT has the potential to become a valuable technique in mastering oral English.

Acknowledgement

The author declares that there are no specific acknowledgements for this work. This manuscript was developed independently, without external funding, institutional sponsorship, or collaborative assistance requiring formal recognition.

References

- Bowers, F. (1984). *Japanese theatre: Origin, Noh drama, puppets, Kabuki spectacle, 3 Kabuki plays in translation. Actor and playwrights, present day trends*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company.
- Berlinger, M. (2000). Encouraging English expression through script-based improvisations. *The Internet TESL Journal*. <http://www.aitech.ac.jp/>
- Clark, A. K., Morrison, T. G., & Wilcox, B. (2009). Readers' theater: A process of developing fourth-graders' reading fluency. *Psychology in the Schools*, 46(4), 349–362. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20388>
- Kabilan, M. K., & Kamaruddin, F. (2010). Engaging learners' comprehension, interest, and motivation to learn literature using readers theatre. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 9(3), 132–159. <https://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/files/2010v9n3art9.pdf>
- Macrae, J. (1985). *Using drama in the classroom*. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.
- Martinez, M., Roser, N. L., & Strecker, S. (1998). "I never thought I could be a star": A readers theatre ticket to fluency. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(2), 326–334.
- Mraz, M., Nichols, W., Caldwell, S., Beisley, R., Sargent, S., & Rupley, W. (2013). Improving oral reading fluency through readers theatre. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 52(2). https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol52/iss2/5
- Sloyer, S. (1982). *Reader's theatre: Story dramatization in the classroom*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.