

EFL learners' perceptions of and attitudes toward the use of Reader Theater for improving oral skills in an ESP course

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Abstract

In today's global world, English speaking skills are important for international contexts. For EFL learners, good oral English skills require constant practice to achieve oral fluency, good pronunciation, and good intonation. Nowadays, communicative language teaching (CLT) is prevalent as many language instructors adopt a CLT curriculum design. However, unmotivated or underachieving EFL learners are often incapable of engaging in CLT activities, such as information gaps and role playing, which require extensive preparation for them. They also appear anxious when they speak in front of others. Reader Theater (RT) has been widely used in the literature and reading classes due to its benefits, such as promoting oral reading fluency (Carrick, 2000; Millin, 1996), as demonstrated in existing research (Busching, 1981; Coody, 1992; Flood, Lapp, Flood, & Nagel, 1992; Harris & Sipay, 1990; Sebesta, 1997; Trousdale & Harris, 1993). Thus, the current study applied RT in an ESP course for oral skill training in order to explore learners' attitudes toward and perceptions of RT in this ESP course as well as its potential benefits for learners in oral practice. A survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics to investigate how students perceive RT in terms of their attitude, confidence, motivation, oral fluency, and accuracy. The findings showed that RT had a positive effect on oral skill training in general. Most of the students agreed that RT had a positive effect on their confidence and motivation for the course. The results offer pedagogical suggestions for future course design.

Keywords: Reader Theater, oral reading fluency, script writing, role-play

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Introduction

In today's global world, English speaking skills are important for international contexts. For EFL learners, good oral English skills require constant practice to achieve oral fluency, good pronunciation, and good intonation. Nowadays, communicative language teaching (CLT) is prevalent as many language instructors adopt a CLT curriculum design. However, unmotivated or underachieving EFL learners are often incapable of engaging in CLT activities, such as information gaps and role playing, which require extensive preparation for them. They also appear anxious when they speak in front of others. Reader Theater (RT) has been widely used in the literature and reading classes due to its benefits, such as promoting oral reading fluency (Carrick, 2000; Millin, 1996), as demonstrated in existing research (Busching, 1981; Coody, 1992; Flood, Lapp, Flood, & Nagel, 1992; Harris & Sipay, 1990; Sebesta, 1997; Trousdale & Harris, 1993).

Reader Theater (RT) is a strategy used to involve students in reading aloud. It combines reading practice and performance. Its goal is to enhance students' reading skills and confidence by having them practice reading with a purpose. RT gives students a real reason to read aloud. The benefits of using the RT strategy are that it promotes fluency, it helps readers learn to read aloud with expression, and it helps build reading confidence.

This study sought to establish empirical data on the benefits of applying RT in an oral communication training class and to explore students' perceptions and attitudes toward RT activities. To this end, the researchers address the following research questions: (1) What are participants' perceptions and attitudes toward the RT activity in the Escort English course? and (2) What are the participants' confidence and motivation levels regarding RT activities in Escort English?

Methodology

This section introduces participants' background, the course design, the instrument, and the data analysis.

Research Setting and Participants

The present study was conducted at a technological university in central Taiwan. Fifty third-year students from the Department of Applied English were surveyed to

investigate their perceptions and attitudes regarding the implementation of in-class RT activity. The respondents were invited to participate by students enrolled in the course Escort English, taught by the researcher.

Course Design

This course, which met for two hours each week, was aimed at enabling students to develop various oral speaking and communicative skills for different business scenarios. The curriculum focused primarily on details of Escort English. The instructor used the teaching method of presentation, practice, and production (PPP) to deliver the course; this teaching method includes lectures, in-class practice, and presentations. Each week, the instructor introduced one scenario from Escort English and had course participants practice in pairs before doing a RT presentation in front of the class.

Reader Theater Activity

In the first class meeting of the course, the students received detailed explanations as to what RT is, how they should do it, and why it is beneficial for them to improve their English oral skills and pronunciation. Moreover, students were told that each RT activity would be graded as a course participation grade. During each class meeting, students were given 10 minutes to practice their dialogue on a specific given topic with their partners. Usually, a big screen with a couple of pictures or photos related to the topic was also provided to help students role-play in the topic. Then students were assigned homework which they needed to rewrite the dialogue and use the expressions and vocabulary learned during class. They needed to practice the intonation, pronunciation, and fluency. Most importantly, they were told to focus on pace and emotion as well.

Instrument and Data Analysis

The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire in the end of the course. The 15 items on the questionnaire were constructed based on the research questions of this study. The items addressed students' perceptions of in-class RT and attitudes toward it. The study applied a 4-point Likert scale (i.e., strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree) for all items. The 4-point scale was used to eliminate the neutral point in order to elicit a definite decision; this approach provided a better measure of the intensity of participants' attitudes or opinions. The data collected were interpreted into

percentages and means to describe students' perceptions and attitudes about participating in the in-class RT activity.

Findings and Discussion

The first part of the findings presents participants' feedback regarding their perceptions, attitudes, confidence, and motivation related to the RT activity. Table 1 summarizes participants' reactions to the 15 statements related to participants' RT activity experience in the class in terms of perception and attitude, confidence, and motivation.

Table 1 *Participants' Survey Responses*

Statement	Percentage (Frequency)			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I enjoy Reader Theater activity in each class meeting.	0%(0)	0%(0)	20%(10)	80%(40)
2. The class is more interesting as it involves acting out the scripts.	0%(0)	0%(0)	20%(10)	80%(40)
3. The photos and images that are provided on the big screen in Reader Theater activity help me to visualize the scenario of the topic.	0%(0)	0%(0)	20%(10)	80%(40)
4. I feel I learned to improve my oral communication when I acted out the scripts.	0%(0)	2%(1)	18%(9)	80%(40)
5. I think Reader Theater activity helps me to develop oral fluency.	0%(0)	0%(0)	10%(5)	90%(45)
6. Reader Theater activity is an effective way of teaching English oral skills.	0%(0)	0%(0)	20%(10)	80%(40)
7. Reader Theater activity helps to improve my English pronunciation.	0%(0)	4%(2)	40%(20)	56%(58)
8. It is not difficult for me to act out the assigned scripts.	0%(0)	4%(2)	40%(20)	56%(28)
9. It is not difficult for me to rewrite the assigned scripts.	0%(0)	20%(10)	16%(8)	64%(32)
10. I feel anxious about role-playing in front of the class.	0%(0)	48%(24)	40%(20)	12%(6)
11. I feel that I have more confidence in English pronunciation in general after taking this course.	0%(0)	4%(2)	48%(24)	48%(24)
12. I enjoyed working with my partner on writing and performing the scripts.	0%(0)	0%(0)	10%(5)	90%(45)
13. I try my best to act out the scripts when I do Reader Theater activity.	0%(0)	0%(0)	40%(20)	60%(30)
14. I look forward to engaging Reader Theater activity before the class meeting starts.	0%(0)	4%(2)	48%(24)	48%(24)
15. Reader Theater activity can motivate me to engage in role playing.	0%(0)	0%(0)	16%(8)	84%(42)

Perception and Attitude (Statements 1–7)

Based on the findings summarized in Table 1, most participants had a positive attitude toward RT activity. Indeed, 98% agreed that RT activity helps improve their oral communication by acting out the scripts. The data from the remaining question items were very consistent, all showing 100% positive responses. In other words, most participants thought that the RT activity was an effective way to teach English pronunciation and fluency. Only 4% of the participants disagreed with the statement “Reader Theater activity helps to improve my English pronunciation.” Overall, this finding suggests that RT should be incorporated into the teaching of oral communication in the classroom.

Confidence (Statements 8–11)

In terms of the difficulty of acting out the scripts, 56% of participants strongly agreed and 40% agreed that it was not difficult to act out the assigned topic and scripts. The remaining 4% disagreed with the statement. Regarding the difficulty of rewriting the scripts, 64% strongly agreed and 16% agreed that they were confident and able to rewrite the scripts. The remaining 20% disagreed with the statement. The data suggest that additional guidance should be provided to participants to enable them to rewrite the scripts. Finally, 52% of the participants claimed that they felt anxious about role-playing in front of the class. The remaining 4% disagreed with the statement.

Motivation (Statements 12–15)

The majority of the participants had positive responses to the motivation category. The data for the four question items were very consistent, with 100% of participants agreeing that they tried their best to write more and 100% stating that they enjoyed working with their partners on RT activity in class. Indeed, 96% of participants looked forward to RT activity; only 4% disagreed with this statement.

As these results indicate, the majority of participants enjoyed RT activity and how it was arranged. Participants’ oral pronunciation and fluency were improved by engaging in RT activity. The results about participants’ confidence in RT activity were mixed, but most participants were confident about their ability to act out and rewrite the scripts. Regarding the motivation questions, the data suggest that the majority of participants were motivated when they engaged in RT activity.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggested that the participants had positive perceptions about their RT experience in the class. They also indicated a positive attitude toward RT activity in the class. Obviously, the participants perceived RT as an effective way to practice their oral communication, which helped improve their fluency and pronunciation while keeping them motivated.

These results can be used to offer some suggestions for teaching. It would be beneficial if instructors provided some script examples for students. This way, students will have a clear idea of how to rewrite their scripts. Moreover, the length of RT activity can be increased to ensure that students have enough practice time.

Due to the time constraints, this study might have some limitations. First, it would have been much more valuable to analyze participants' oral presentations to determine their improvement in speaking fluency and pronunciation. Second, conducting interviews would probably enhance the conclusions of this study.

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