

The power of Readers Theater: from reading to writing

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Although using Readers Theater (RT) in various educational settings is not a new idea, few studies have been conducted to address both its theoretical and pedagogical issues in language classrooms. In this action research study, the teacher-researcher consistently explored three phases of RT activities with 14 ESL students in an intermediate L2 writing class in a US university. In Phase 1, students read aloud their chosen sentences from the source text to generate discussion of the text's main idea. Phase 2 used student-chosen salient passages to extrapolate individual responses and meanings from the source text. In Phase 3, students created their own conclusions to the text. Data collected via students' reflective journals were analyzed, interpreted and compared with ESL teachers' reactions to RT through a simulated RT workshop. Positive effects of using RT were found. Theoretical concerns and issues of cultural appropriacy, and the pedagogical implications of RT are discussed. Recommendations for future research on RT in language classrooms are also given.

Introduction

Readers Theater, a dramatic approach to literature, is a creative oral reading of any type of literature that contains 'theater,' be it a play or otherwise (White 1993). In RT, meanings of a given text are constructed and/or reconstructed through dramatic exploration, which invites creativity and imagination, and conforms to no one style. Recently, RT has been used as an aesthetic presentation mode in professional conferences, as a means for sharing student writings in school events (Donmoyer and Donmoyer 1991), and, more recently, as a teaching technique in language classrooms where students are engaged in negotiating the meanings of the text, exchanging their interpretations of the text, and generating their responses to the text through multi-phased dramatic classroom activities (for example, Kao and O'Neill 1998, Liu 1998, Liu and Miller 1998). However, literature on RT as applied to language classrooms is still scarce. One possible explanation for this is that RT is often regarded as a form of theatrical performance in creative drama (Bolton 1986), rather than a variation in process drama (Bolton 1986, O'Neill and Lambert 1982). As a result, language teachers sometimes feel intimidated in using this technique due to their lack of artistic training in theater and/or their concern about the physical constraints of the classroom. As Schogenn (1991) suggests, there are several issues we need to consider while using RT in our language classrooms: Can RT lower affective filters in classroom environments? Do students have positive experiences with RT activities in class? Do RT activities have any effect on students'

writing? These questions are related to both theoretical and pedagogical issues.

The study In Winter quarter, 1997, I had the opportunity to teach an ESL writing course for intermediate undergraduate students in a US midwestern university. This was the middle of the three ESL courses for undergraduate students. The middle course is designed to improve the writing skills of students through the use of literature. Therefore, the materials chosen for reading, which serve as the primary sources for students' writing, are mainly short stories, personal anecdotes, familiar essays and the like. The rationale is to enhance students' abilities to reflect upon, evaluate, revise, and value their own writing, and to gain deeper insight into their readings while completing a wide range of reading/writing tasks.

There were 14 students enrolled in my 10-week class, which was one of the seven classes at the same level taught by different teachers. While coping with other teachers' pace under the direction of the course coordinator, I designed a series of tasks on RT across four reading assignments: two short stories and two personal narratives. These main tasks designed for RT included: (1) Picking favourite quotes from the readings; (2) Choosing sentences from their reading-responses; and (3) Creating conclusions for the stories based on their own interpretations. All these tasks were then 'acted out' in an improvisational setting.

Data Data came from four sources: (1) my own reflexive journals after each class in which RT activities were used; (2) my students' journals after each RT activity (the journals were a partial requirement of the class); (3) a survey on students' reactions towards the use of RT in class; and (4) the students' writings as a result of RT activities.

Three phases of RT will be described and analyzed from reading to writing: reading aloud from readings, reading aloud from reading-responses, and reading aloud from writings. Both theoretical concerns and pedagogical implications in using RT in ESL classrooms were addressed by incorporating teachers' reactions generated through an RT workshop at a US regional TESOL conference in April 1997.

Three phases of RT
*Phase one: Reading
aloud from the
readings*

As the first RT activity, my students were asked to pick the quote they liked the most from reading a short story, 'Passport to Knowledge', a narrative piece about the evolution of an African-American from a gangster to a writer. The chosen quotes were written down on pieces of paper and then dropped into a box. The class then formed a semi-circle, and each student picked a quote from the box. They started reading their chosen quotations without assigning who should read first, second, etc. They had to make a decision about when to read out their quotes based on their understanding of the story.

Although the students knew that they should read whenever they felt it was the right moment, no one started first. I reassured them about the

art of improvisation, and encouraged them to try. The tension was soon broken when someone in class read out her quote, followed by another, and another . . . Even though I could tell that the quotes they chose to read were sometimes out of sequence in terms of the story line, I tried not to interrupt them until they finished the first round. Then the whole class reflected on their reading-aloud, and made suggestions for alternations. When questions arose regarding the use of a quote which had been repeatedly chosen by a few students, I encouraged them to think about more creative ways to deal with the quote, such as reading it one after another, varying the intonation or altering the volume of their voices, or trying to read one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end, to echo the theme of the story. The students were obviously inspired, and after trying different combinations they reflected on each experience. When they realized how different the effects were with different combinations of reading aloud, they began to feel highly motivated in doing RT activities.

A Japanese student wrote the following in her journal:

My first experience of Readers Theater was uneasy. When the teacher said, 'Let's do Readers Theater', I was so upset as it seemed very difficult to do with everyone. At the beginning, everyone didn't know who should start reading. Everyone kept quiet. The interesting points about this activity is to assume to guess which turn or when I say my part. It was very difficult to decide my turn after whom I have to follow my sentences. To read aloud my sentence in proper parts, I had to pay enough attention to other articles carefully and to follow the story to construct ideas in my mind.

Many students regard RT as a new but challenging learning experience. They have to read the story very carefully in order to successfully complete this task. Also, the students are checking their comprehension collaboratively and creatively as they are exploring the story and negotiating the story line in an improvisational manner. Here is a journal excerpt from a Korean student:

At the beginning, I feel rather surprised and confused because I haven't done it before, but once we started, I like this Readers Theater. After connecting our sentences together, the summary of the story is there, and we can even create a short story based on our own feelings and ideas. In fact, we have to understand the whole context, therefore I can predict at which point my thought fits properly. The most important thing in doing this activity is co-operation. As everybody has his/her own ideas, co-operation such as harmony is necessary.

Phase two: Reading aloud from reading responses

RT is more than reading aloud from the published readings. It can also be used as a means to exchange students' reading responses. To expand the options in using RT, I invited my students to select the quotes from their own responses to the assigned readings, and to share them in class. Rather than reading aloud their own quotes, they had to randomly select and read aloud the quotes of others. This is obviously more challenging

to students as they are creating a new text, and a new theme, or multiple themes, through their responses. Everyone is a part of this creative reading, and everyone is held responsible for the success of the creation.

The text which the students wrote their responses about was Xin Liu Gale's 'Conversing across cultures: Rewriting 'Self'', an essay about the writer's struggle in balancing her dual social identities in two academic settings. The students were asked to write a response paper based on their reading of this essay before they came to class, and to choose three quotes from their response papers to share in class. The first round of the reading aloud turned out to be a surprise, as the quotes were mixed up with different pronouns. Some with 'she/author/Xin Liu Gale', some with 'I', 'we', 'you', 'they', and 'it'. In the follow-up reflection, the class agreed that the quotes should be read in several rounds, according to the pronouns used in each quote. Therefore, we started with the 'I' group, and then the 'we' group, and eventually the 'she/the author' group. Each group did well, and the whole class seemed to be excited to hear the responses to the reading from so many perspectives.

In the follow-up journal, a Korean student wrote:

I think this Readers Theater activity is a pre-step towards collaborative writing. In doing our collaborative writing as a group, each group member's thinking is so different, and we sometimes cannot agree with each other. Through reading aloud our own writings, we can easily find some common themes and viewpoints we can agree upon for writing.

The student's ideas were shared by her classmates. A Taiwanese student expressed her conflicts in doing this task:

Honestly speaking, I did not like the quotes I picked from the box. I did not mean that these quotes were not as well written as mine. What I meant was that these quotes expressed different opinions about the story, which I thought unimportant. However, when I read them aloud in today's activity, I began to like the quotes and I found them meaningful in the context where I chose to participate. This reminds me that I should try to understand my group members' perspectives in our collaborative essay.

Phase three:
Reading aloud from
writings

One of the obvious goals of using RT in my ESL composition class was to see the effects of this technique on students' writing. To meet this end, I tried another RT activity: having students read aloud what they had written as the imaginative conclusion to the story 'A woman like me is not suitable for any man's love', a melancholy narrative piece from the viewpoint of a cosmetician at a funeral parlour. The students were requested to compose an imaginative ending to the story in the form of a dialogue. They chose their own partners, and were requested to hand in their dialogues the next day. When I collected their dialogues in the next class, I was genuinely amazed not only by the quantity, but also by the creativity and imagination of their texts.

My positive impression of the quantity was soon doubled by the quality of their writing and performance. As required by this RT activity, students were encouraged to ‘act out’ the imaginative ending of the story by reading aloud their dialogues with feeling and dramatic facial expressions. As they were not exactly sure what they were expected to do, I volunteered to act out a dialogue with a student while showing emotion in reading, and acting out dramatic effects. The rest of the class turned out to be quite theatrical. I had never seen my students so enthusiastic and engaged, to the point where they did not want to leave the class when it was over.

What fascinated me most was that two Indonesian students—who always chose to sit at the back and seldom participated in class discussion, and who always turned in their assignments with many grammar mistakes and rhetorical weaknesses—did an excellent job in writing their dialogue, and in reading it aloud with great emotion. They took the task so seriously that it seemed as if they wanted to convince me through their imaginary conclusion and performance that they, too, could do a good job. Their dialogue revealed several twists in the story, and their acting was first-rate. In their journals, the two Indonesian students revealed the effects of RT on their writing:

A: I am so pleased that our dialogue went so well today. I feel I can write more and when I have the confidence in writing, I find many of the mistakes I usually make are gone.

B: Writing became interesting and informative. I know what I want to write and when I think of sharing our writing with the class, I feel I need to put down every thought of mine to show my classmates and the teacher that I can not only write in English, but write well.

To most of the students, sharing their writing through RT is rewarding. As an Indonesian student revealed:

I enjoyed so much reading my dialogues as I anticipated the ending of the story XiXi. I not only enjoyed mine but also others’. The other classmates’ endings were so creative that they gave me new good ideas what is good ending and what I need to write good ending of the story.

This Indonesian student’s reflection was shared by many other students in class. They liked this RT activity because they could see different kinds of endings for the story, and different kinds of personalities for the main characters of the story. Through reading, they experienced more possible endings to the story.

Theoretical considerations

Through this RT experience, students have a chance to understand the readings by collaborating with peers and reflecting on their different experiences. In the collaborative process of reading, students learn to build a collective belief about the imaginary situation, and to explore issues through interpretive thinking, reflective writing, and dramatic reading. Students in RT have to be independent decision-makers in terms of what they choose to read and when to participate in the

reading, which will shape whatever is presented as a whole. Students all have multiple roles in RT: they are authors, storytellers, audience, and critics. When they stop occasionally to assess the effectiveness of their reading, they reflect on the implications of what they have done, and renegotiate the meaning of the readings and writings. In RT, however, students' focus is different from that of the theater performers who look at the dramatic effect of their work on the audience. In RT, every student is a participant, analyzing the dramatic effect of their own work on themselves. The meanings they have constructed as a group in RT are reflected through their periodical RT journals. They work in class as a whole, reflecting on what they do during the process of constructing meaning together, and when they are creating a dramatic world together. This is often where the learning takes place, and as reflected in this study, where the students want to respond through their writings.

RT, when used in the classroom, becomes one of the dramatic activities associated with process drama (Bolton 1986, O'Neill and Lambert 1982), which is almost synonymous with the terms drama in education, or educational drama, classroom drama, informal drama, developmental drama, curriculum drama, improvisation, role drama, creative dramatics, and creative drama (O'Neill 1995). As a dramatic activity, RT encourages students to participate directly in interpretation and reflection on the readings, reading responses, and their own writings, as revealed in the study. The students' involvement and initiative that grew from participating in the three-phase activities fulfilled the purpose of RT through the interpretation of the readings, as well as through the writings. The original readings serve as pre-texts, enriching, controlling, and sustaining the students' explorations through their reading, writing, and rereading.

The cultural appropriacy of RT to ESL students

The power of RT can be seen in its ability to engage learners in constructing their own language growth, reflecting meaning in the fullest sense of personal and cultural relevance, developing students' individual language abilities, and supporting self-initiated activity. In a language classroom where ESL students are drawn from diverse linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds, RT seeks to provide great opportunities for students to understand one another's perspectives through cooperative and supportive interactions with peers, which will help build social competence and confidence in communication in multicultural settings. In a language classroom where students share the same or similar linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds, RT can enhance cultural awareness and sensitivity between the home culture and the target culture through meaning negotiation and cultural comparisons and reflections. Through RT, students in both heterogeneous and homogeneous groups can build social skills and become more sensitive listeners, more apt conversationalists, more reflective readers, and more creative writers.

Pedagogical implications

The experience of using RT in my class was very positive. According to the survey results, the students see the benefits in three ways: (1) RT

improves language skills, (2) RT encourages peer collaboration, and (3) RT enlivens the classroom atmosphere. They also made some suggestions for improving the effectiveness of RT, so that, for instance, after doing the RT it might be better to have a printed story or two that the students successfully made during the RT activities. Some students in class also suggested that we try some readings instead of stories, to see whether they can work equally well. The majority of the students admitted that they wished they had read the assigned readings more carefully, an indication of increased motivation in completing the learning tasks because of the RT activities. A few students mentioned the importance of the seating arrangement: sitting in a semi-circle seems facilitative for RT activities to take place.

In order to explore the pedagogical implication of RT, I conducted a workshop in a US regional TESOL conference in Spring 1997. About ten ESL teachers (K-12 and college/university) experienced the simulated three phases of RT activities based on the short story, 'The Story of an Hour', by Kate Chopin (1894). The survey results reveal the participant teachers' positive impressions of using RT in ESL classrooms in the following six ways: (1) RT encourages and 'forces' student participation; (2) RT seems easy and non-threatening to the students; (3) RT is good for developing attentiveness; (4) RT can help teachers avoid bias towards students; (5) RT is a more interesting and interactive way of getting students to think, to reflect, and to write; (6) RT helps students to analyze their own writings better.

The teachers also made some suggestions regarding who benefits most from RT, and what needs to be done to enhance the effectiveness of RT in language classrooms. They felt that RT will work better for intermediate and advanced ESL students. They also suggested that language teachers need to consider what to do next as a follow-up to RT activities. Interestingly, the teachers had the same suggestion as my students, in that they also wanted to explore the potential of using RT in other genres.

Conclusion RT seems to be cognitively challenging, socioculturally rewarding, and affectively appealing. This study suggests that RT has the potential to become a valuable technique in language learning and teaching. It is consistent with communicative competence as a purpose, and interaction as a focus in language learning and teaching. Though some challenges remain regarding its integration into a syllabus to meet the needs of language learners from diverse backgrounds, the multiple functions of RT in combining the important elements of linguistic competence with performance, emotional engagement with physical participation, and reading with writing cannot be ignored. What is needed is a joint effort by teachers and researchers in designing and implementing more classroom activities to substantiate the role of RT in different language classrooms at different levels, and in both ESL and EFL settings.

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