

READERS THEATRE SOMETHING OLD BUT STILL AN ASSIDUOUS TOOL TO ACQUIRE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to investigate the effects of including readers' theatre (RT) as part of classroom instruction in English proficiency classes. The participants for the study were first-semester diploma students who had enrolled in English language proficiency class at a public university. A sample of 85 first semester diploma students was purposively chosen to represent the participants for treated and control groups respectively. Readers' theatre was added to the experimental group's proficiency class, while the control group was taught the language skills without readers theatre. At the end of the study the students were tested in three different language skills; speaking (role play), listening and reading (reading comprehension). Data was analyzed using a quantitative analytical tool SPSS. The results indicated the mean score of speaking, listening and reading for the treated group students were higher than the control group students. Next, independent T-tests at a 0.05 level of significance showed that there was a significant difference on mean test score between the treated and controlled group for speaking, listening and reading tests where all the p-values were less than 0.05. The results invoke that the use of RT in classroom instruction improves the students' test score in speaking, listening, and reading in English. Hence, incorporating Reader's Theatre in teaching and learning of the English language is beneficial to increase fluency skill for the tertiary students.

Keywords: Readers Theatre, English language skills, language proficiency

INTRODUCTION

More often than not, the ability to speak, write, read and communicate well in English would mean a plus point to job seekers and career advancement in Malaysia. Therefore, it is essential that students acquire fluency in English to secure a good job. However according to a report by Hassan and Selamat (2017), the English language fluency of some local graduates is comparatively low in Malaysia. Potential employers also highlight on how students are not able to converse well in English in job interviews (Ng, 2014; Arukesamy, 2015). To avoid more disappointment in the level of English language proficiency, more efficient, effective and enjoyable English teaching and learning ways of teaching language skills need to be incorporated for students in local schools and universities to promote better English fluency.

One of the areas of English fluency is the ability to read and speak which enables people to share thoughts and ideas. Fluency in reading is important because reading would lead to students discovering new words and new knowledge. According to a study conducted by Shanthi, Thayalan, Zainon, & De Mello (2019), lack of vocabulary and fear of being made fun off because of wrong pronunciation of words are a few contributing factors that inhibit students from speaking in English. It is essential that students receive proper instruction to develop their fluency in English for their present academic needs and for their future working life.

One of the most effective tools to improve fluency in English is the use of Readers Theater (RT) in classroom that are fun and exciting. RT does not need special costumes, props or memorized lines. In RT costumes, backdrop, and props are optional unlike in a staged drama, however simple accessories such as a cardboard cut-out of a crown can be used to denote a king or queen. It is the combination of engaging students to speak clearly with proper pronunciation, good intonation, and theatrical recital that makes RT a valuable tool for developing the ability to speak, listen and read among students especially among the reluctant ones (Shanthi et al., 2019). It is noted that even shy and reluctant students change their attitude toward learning English when teachers incorporate RT in classrooms (Sikandar et.al., 2018). According to Karabag (2015) the versatility of RT is such that students of a different ages, groups and language proficiency levels can gain from it and come to appreciate RT as part of effective language learning tools. Readers Theater can be used as a language teaching device as it promotes language learning indirectly unlike the traditional classroom learning where the teacher is in control and student participation is minimal. On the contrary, RT allows the students to participate interactively throughout the class period.

To date, most studies conducted using RT in classroom is among the primary and high school students (Lin, 2015; Sikandar et.al, 2018; (Shanthi, Zainon, & Thayalan, 2018). Therefore, there is a gap of knowledge on whether RT would benefit students from tertiary level in a Malaysian setting. This investigation looks at whether there is any statistical significance in using readers' theatre in classroom and the achievement of students in speaking, listening and reading tests. The focus of this study is to close the gap between classroom practice and research related to implementing readers' theatre to promote fluency in English.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

It was observed that teachers of English subject find it demanding and time consuming to teach students language in classrooms using more fun and creative ways (Shanthi et.al., 2018). These teachers fail to see that in order to attract students' attention especially the reluctant ones, fun and engaging activities prove to be a better learning tool than rote learning. The weak and reluctant learners are often willing to participate in fun learning activities such as RT as it is not a form of passive but rather RT provides many opportunities to practice and apply what they have learned in class.

At University Teknologi MARA (UiTM), ELC121 (Integrated Language Skills 1) is an English language proficiency course offered to first semester students at the diploma level. "This course is intended to develop the listening, speaking and reading skills to help students perform competently in the social and academic settings. ELC121 aims to develop higher-level grammatical construction, vocabulary expansion and extensive reading comprehension skills to increase students' lexical density" (UiTM, 2019). Therefore, in ELC121, the course expects students to be active participants in the process of language learning in the classroom so the experience of learning would be meaningful to them and the interest to acquire the language is authentic. According to Howatt and Smith (2014), language teaching approaches that stress on the teaching of rules and strategies per se will not produce language learners who are fluent in the target language.

According to Shanthi et.al. (2018), some problems that may hinder students from developing their speaking skills are issues such as lack of ideas, shyness, low participation, and preference to use mother language. All these issues will be addressed one way or another when incorporating RT as part of teaching and learning of English. This is because the progressive steps in the RT activity carried out in this study would guide students to explore the script so that they can best portray a character and storyline by striving for voice flexibility, good articulation, proper pronunciation, and projection, and in the process build their self-confidence to speak English.

This study attempts to show the value of using RT as a strategy to increase English fluency. The purpose of the study is to gauge student's experience in using RT, and to determine if there is a relationship between incorporating RT in the teaching and learning and the students' final grade for ELC121. The study addresses the following research questions:

Research question #1: Is there a difference in students' speaking scores when they are taught speaking skills using readers' theatre and when taught using tradition-based instruction?

Research question #2: Is there a difference in students' listening scores when they are taught listening skill using readers' theatre-and when they are taught using tradition-based instruction?

Research question #3: Is there a difference in students' reading comprehension scores when they are reading skill using readers' theatre and when they are taught using tradition-based instruction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Readers Theatre

Reader's theatre (RT) is a theatrical expression of a script that emphasises on clarity and projection of spoken words and bodily expressions. While there are a number of teaching techniques that can be used to help students develop their language fluency, readers theater is a particular teaching technique that combines repetitive reading, clear and precise pronunciation, and theatrical expression (Augustine et.al., 2015). RT can be regarded as a storytelling device that stimulates the imagination and promotes all of the four language skills (Karabag, 2015). RT can be a vital tool to successfully motivating students to read, write, listen and speak in English, and thus improving students' fluency in the language. Several studies suggest that readers theatre is an effective way to improve the fluency of students in English (Qannubi et al., 2018; Shanthi et al., 2019; Augustin, Vianty, & Zuraida, 2015; Myrset, 2016). Studies have also shown that readers theatre motivates students to become more interested in becoming fluent readers (Lin, 2015). The students who present the script are building their oral and reading and presentation skills, while the students in the audience build their listening skills (Karabag, 2015).

A well-planned series of RT; starting from the planning, rehearsal and up to the performance stage has been proven to be effective at improving not only the student's fluency in the language, but has shown to benefit pupils' motivation and confidence to learn the language. (Qannubi, Gabarre, & Mirza, 2018; Myrset, 2016; Karabag, 2015; Shanthi, Zainon, & Thayalan, 2018). Apart from that, RT has been acknowledged as an enjoyable way to inspire learners not only to speak, but through a repetitive reading of the script encourage students learn new words and build their confidence to master English (Shanthi, Zainon, & Thayalan, 2018; Qannubi, Gabarre, & Mirza, 2018). When exciting and interesting topics and activities are used even struggling speakers to speak up (Shanthi et.al., 2018; Qannubi et.al., 2018). Hence, it can be concluded that RT when included as part of classroom instruction can entail to students' active engagement and increase their confidence and motivation to learn English.

Language skills and Readers Theatre

Listening and speaking skills normally go hand-in-hand where fluency in English is concern. It is logical that students should be talking about things that they listen to. However, most learners are afraid to talk to an audience and one of the best ways to resolve the fear is building learners' confidence to use the language. When students take risks in speaking in front of others, students make significant progress in improving their speaking skills (Lin, 2015). RT encourages students to use language in a meaningful context, and in the process helps them to improve their speaking skills, and develops students' listening skills as they listen and learn from others during practice and performance stage (Augustin et al., 2015). Students have to pay attention to the sounds of the words, detect and correct wrong pronunciation, thus training them to become active listeners by understanding and reflecting about what is read aloud (Lin, 2015). During readers theatre activity students interact with others, share their thought, build on each other's ideas, maintain conversation and continually build on the ideas of others in the build-up to the final presentation to an audience (Myrset, 2016).

While practicing with the RT script, students are encouraged to read by grouping words

into phrases and to read them at an appropriate speed with facial expressions, which is one aspect to improve fluency in the language. Studies have indicated that there is a strong relationship between reading in meaningful chunks and reading comprehension (Veenendaal, Groen, & Verhoeven, 2015; Kim & Wagner, 2015). The ability to read with correct facial expression makes written words sound like speech. Teachers seldom focus on these abilities of fluency. They believe that reading words quickly is fluency, but the ability to read recognize and read words in chunks and with expression are needed in order to understand an author's intended meaning (Veenendaal, Groen, & Verhoeven, 2015). Readers theatre can help these aspects of fluency by modeling fluent reading and having students read texts in natural, speech-like segments (Hyona & Ekholm, 2016).

In short, RT endows students to play the roles they are assigned to well because it is team work. They make efforts to perform well and this increases their proficiency in speaking and reading English. It leads even reluctant students "to open their mouth to speak a language" (Lin, 2015).

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

Eighty-five university students participated in the study. They were from the first-year diploma students taking their first level of English proficiency class – Integrated language skills I. Their average grade for English at *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) was B (60 to 64 marks). Thus, the students were regarded to have a fair English language proficiency level. Readers Theater was implemented for ten weeks after which the students were tested for speaking, listening and reading tests.

Readers Theatre Script

The study used readers' theatre scripts downloaded from Aaron Shepard's Readers Theatre Edition at <http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/RTE.html>. Students adapted the scripts to suit the group's interest. The website was chosen for a few reasons. The scripts have interesting and compelling content, they were dialogue in nature and flow at a steady pace. The author also gives a prescription for each story; the number of characters, time for presentation and the background of the story. Therefore, students can scan through the scripts and choose one that they can relate to thus making it easier for them to rewrite the script to suit their RT practices and presentation. The students were given two hours of English class each week in which they were taught using Readers Theater. The instructor's intention of introducing RT is to give the students a different English learning experience by making learning English enjoyable. It was hoped that RT would promote English language fluency through the engagement of students with the text.

Procedure

Four groups of students were randomly selected for the study. Each group had 4 hours of contact time with their lecturer. The four groups were taught according to a prescribed syllabus set by the faculty. However, the treated groups were taught using a mix method of: two hours of routine classroom teaching that comprises of using the activities prescribed by the weekly schedule for

ELC121 and two hours of learning using readers’ theatre. On the other hand, the control groups were taught 4 hours solely base on the activities prescribed by the ELC121 weekly schedule; using the more traditional methods of role play for speaking, passive and active listening and reading comprehension. The classes were taught by the same lecturer. The contact hours between the teacher and students for RT were 2 hours per week whereby the lecturer would handle 4 to 5 groups of students that comprised six to eight members. Similar language skills were taught; reading, listening and speaking were taught for the controlled and experimental groups. Nevertheless, the experimental group had RT incorporated in their English language lessons for 7 weeks, At the end of the 7 weeks of learning both the controlled and experimental group sat for the same listening, speaking and reading comprehension tests. Table 1 shows the phases of the implementation of the study.

Table 1
 Implementation of Study

Week 1	Selection of RT scripts from Aaron Shepard and adaptation.
Week 2	Vocabulary and pronunciation practice for unfamiliar words using Merrian Webster online dictionary and practice reading of RT script.
Week 3	Rehearsing - A student-centered practice cycle: Practice- Explore- Practice - where students add creativity for stage performance
Week 4	The students have readers' theater performances captured on video for critic and make amendments to their presentation
Week 5	Students review their presentation from video captured on week 4 and made adjustment to their presentation
Week 6	Final rehearsal
Week 7	Presentation Day- Final performance to an audience
Week 8	Speaking test
Week 9	Listening Test
Week 10	Reading Test

The readers’ theatre group was taught using script downloaded from Aaron Shepard’s Readers Theatre Edition. Students were allowed to explore the website and choose a RT script that most fitted their group in terms of number of characters, the allotted time for performance of 10 to 12 minutes, and the group’s interest. In the implementation of the study, students were allowed to explore the script by reading aloud in chorus, checking for word meaning and correct pronunciation using online Webster Merriam dictionary that gives the definition of words and the correct pronunciation of words. After spending a week exploring and adapting the scripts to suit the group’s needs, the lecturer now acted as a facilitator gave feedback on how to read expressively, and clearly with proper pronunciation. During this stage, students rehearsed their scripts and prepared for their performance. All rehearsal time was dedicated to making sure that the script was read with proper expression, intonation, phase and rate. Students selected roles that suited which gave them a sense of ownership. Students helped each other to continuously rehearse reading the scripts aloud repetitively to build their confidence for their final performance.

Finally, students performed to an audience of over 200 students and lecturers on the seventh week. The step-by-step approach of RT was expected to boost not only students’

speaking, reading and their listening skills but their self-esteem and motivation to transform from a reluctant learner of English to an eager one. Finally, they were tested for speaking, listening and reading comprehension. Test scores were with the controlled group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The purpose of the study is to gauge student's experience in using RT to improve their English fluency, and to determine if there is a relationship between using RT as a teaching and learning tool and the students' final grade for the English proficiency course ELC121. Table 2 shows the number participants in the controlled group which did not incorporate RT in their English proficiency classes was 42 (49.4%) while the treated group which had RT in their classes was 43 (50.5%).

Table 2
 Percentage and Frequency Analyses of Population for the Study

Controlled population			Treated population		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
AS1161A2	18	21.2	IC1201A2	23	27.1
IC1201C1	24	28.2	AS1161A1	20	23.5
TOTAL	42	49.4		43	50.6

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistic for the treated and controlled groups. On the average, the reading test score was the highest for the treated group at 26.651, while the lowest was the speaking score 15.79. Similar trend was also seen in the controlled group where the highest score was for the reading test which was 20.060 and the least was for the speaking test 13.595. Overall, the mean score for speaking, listening and reading tests for the treated group were higher than the control group.

Table 3
 Descriptive statistic of Speaking, Listening and Reading test score

Test	Mean of Test Score	
	Treated Group	Controlled Group
Speaking	15.791	13.595
Listening	16.093	14.429
Reading	26.651	20.060

An independent t-test was carried out to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the means of the treated and controlled groups in the three tests conducted: speaking, listening and reading.

Table 4
 Mean difference score for each test

Test	Mean Differences	p-values	Decision
Speaking	2.1955	.000	Significant
Listening	1.6645	.003	Significant
Reading	6.5916	.000	Significant

Table 4 shows the difference in mean score for each test where the mean score of the treated group minus the mean score of the controlled group. The Table shows that all test exhibit positive mean difference score ranging from 1.6645 to 6.5913. The reading test score has the largest positive mean difference score while listening has the smallest positive difference score. The results show that all the test has a p-values of less than 0.05. Therefore, the study shows that there is significant different on mean test score between treated and controlled group for speaking, listening and reading tests.

Next, the correlation coefficient values between speaking, listening, reading test and overall English achievement were determined. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5
 Correlation Coefficient between each test and overall English achievement

Test	Coefficient	p-value
Speaking	0.709	0.000
Listening	0.712	0.000
Reading	0.941	0.000

Based on Table 5, it can be seen that the correlation between each tests and overall English achievement were significant since p-value is less than 0.05. The coefficient value indicate that there is strong positive correlation between speaking score ($r = 0.709$), listening score ($r = 0.712$) and overall English achievement. While the coefficient between reading score and overall score shown the strongest positive correlation ($r = 0.941$) compared to the others.

This study started with three research questions as stated below:

Research question #1: Is there a difference in students' speaking scores when they are taught speaking skills using readers' theatre and when taught using tradition-based instruction?

Research question #2: Is there a difference in students' listening scores when they are taught listening skill using readers' theatre-and when they are taught using tradition-based instruction?

Research question #3: Is there a difference in students' reading comprehension scores when they are reading skill using readers' theatre and when they are taught using tradition-based instruction?

The findings of the study show that by incorporating RT in classroom instruction, students

from the experiment group did better in all the three language skill tests: reading comprehension, speaking and listening compared to the controlled group which learned the language skills without RT.

Discussion

Much of the research depicting the benefits of Readers Theatre in the classroom has been with young learners (Sikandar, Abdullah, & Raj, 2018). This study has shown that RT can also help to improve English language proficiency among tertiary learners too. This study has firstly confirmed the potential of RT to enhance the listening, speaking and reading skills among tertiary students.

Based on the instructor's observation even the weak, shy and reluctant learners who were apprehensive came out of their fear zone and performed well in the final RT presentation. The confidence and motivation inculcated through RT could have propelled them to do better from those in the controlled group in the final listening, speaking and reading tests.

Based on the observation by the instructor, she reported that she noticed, for example, how students' pronunciation progressively got better as she encouraged the students to check the correct pronunciation of words using the online Merriam Webster dictionary during practice sessions. She also reported that when students learnt to use the online dictionary, they were more confident to use English. The instructor also noted how reading fluency improved as the students read the text over and over and became more and more familiar with the meaning of words in context and the content of the script. Since the focus of RT was on expressing the meaning of the texts therefore knowing the meaning of words used in the script was imperative so that students can express the correct meaning of the text, studies of reading in English as a foreign language have shown that, for example, vocabulary and language rules are developed when the focus is on reading for meaning and pleasure (Whitten, Labby, & Sullivan, 2016; Krashen, 1993) for which RT activities stand for. Furthermore, Whitten et al. (2016) claim that a greater wanting to read among students is created when their fluency in reading is improved. The final observation that the instructor cum researcher would like to share is how the students became independent learners while taking part in RT. Once the students were confident with the script the students put in a lot of hard work and effort by rehearsing outside classroom teaching and learning. This new attitude towards learning English was what the teacher termed as motivation to learn the language. When staging the final presentation to students and lecturers from other classes who did not participate in the RT project, it created an even bigger interest among the students to "show off" to those who did not participate in RT their new-found ability to speak, read and perform in English to an audience. Hence, it can be concluded that RT gave them a reason to learn English in a context that was meaningful to them. Motivation, self-confidence and low anxiety are often directly affected by how the learner experiences classroom learning especially in Malaysia where English is learnt as second language. A learning context in which learners feel that they can use the target language in meaningful communication is likely to increase their motivation and confidence, especially if takes place on a low anxiety situation (Krashen, 1993). Positive language learning experiences gathered from RT can be deduced would be a catalyst to bring about love for the language and bring about positive experiences in other aspects of language learning. However, the limitation of this study is due to the small sample size, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to the entire population of students at tertiary level.

CONCLUSION

Readers theater has been regarded as a powerful language teaching tool, because it encourages the students to be engaged interactively all of the class period (Lin, 2015b). Readers' theater is truly a social, cooperative activity that is appropriate for all readers at any grade level and across any subject area (Shanthi et al., 2019; Qannubi et al., 2018). In conclusion, it can be surmised that RT is a good tool to use for teaching English at tertiary level. Students who initially had problems comprehending reading text, improved their comprehension by reading in meaning chunks that made reading comprehension much easier. Students who were scared to speak in front of their classmates become confident to perform to an audience. The incorporation of RT in classroom has created a learning journey that emphasized on explanation of scripts and representation of the story, pronunciation, intonation, facial expression, voice, and team spirit and interaction. The incorporation of RT in classroom teaching and learning has nurtured a creative and fun activity for students to learn English. RT has been reported as a fun, inclusive, collaborative activity that can help students improve fluency and comprehension (Augustin et al., 2015; Shanthi et al., 2019). It can encourage students not only to express themselves in speaking but also encourage student collaboration in learning English (Karabag, 2015, Shanthi et al., 2019).

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