

## Implementing Readers' Theater for a Project-Based *Advanced English* course

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the efficacy of readers' theatre-based instruction in an *Advanced English* course involving 21 freshman at Rikkyo University. The students were enrolled on an advanced-level English class in the first semester focusing on reading and writing. In the second semester, the same students embarked on a readers' theatre project to reinforce first semester skills. Walker's (Walker, 2018) *Her Own Worst Enemy* was chosen as the main text for the course. A background discussion of the play involved techniques of skimming, scanning, and inferencing to further develop students' reading skills. Three groups comprising seven students performed different roles in the seven-member cast. The teacher facilitated rehearsal sessions by having students highlight their parts, add descriptions of action on their scripts, delete or add lines, practice movements, make notes of different emotional moments, and mark different levels of intonation. Dramatic reading rehearsals enabled students to experience language use from within and think on how sentences, vocabulary words, and phrases can be used to achieve communication goals. Rehearsals culminated in readers' theatre performances where students read aloud and only glanced at the script half the time. Rehearsals culminated in readers' theatre performances where students read aloud and only glanced at the script half the time. Finally, students wrote an alternative ending to the play and performed it in groups. A questionnaire was administered after the project to gather data and student feedback. The findings of the study indicate that implementing readers' theatre as a project-based English class enabled positive changes in enhancing students' reading, writing, and presentation skills.

*Keywords:* reading, writing, presentation, rehearsals, readers' theatre

### Introduction

In view of Japanese university-level EFL learner needs regarding reading, writing, and presentation skills, a drama-based approach to English language teaching can prove effective as Göksel (2021) asserts that Drama in Education (DiE) is a well-recognized pedagogy in many educational systems. However, there seems to be some hesitance in experimenting with drama-based pedagogy in EFL classes at the university level in Japan (Donnery, 2013) although the use of drama in teaching of foreign languages is not a novel approach and its beginnings can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Schewe 2007, cited in Giebert, 2014). Since the late 1970s, with the increasing popularity of the Communicative Approach, drama-based pedagogy has been an integral part of foreign language teaching and is recognized and appreciated by some English language teachers although the approaches to integrating them in classes vary. This paper outlines the production process of a student-centered readers' theatre project. Starting with a discussion of the playscript and comprehension questions, the project progressed to theatrical readings, performing readers' theatre, adding a scene to an existing script, and presenting it in class. At the conclusion of the study, students answered a survey, with the results indicating that readers' theatre enhanced reading, writing, and presentation skills.

## The Teaching Context

A class of 21 first-year university students (aged 18–19 years), majoring in Business and International Business at Rikkyo University, participated in this project. The students had TOEIC scores of 600 and over, which is equivalent to *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) level B1. Demographic information collected through a questionnaire showed that the students have received six years of English education at junior high school and high school. Some had lived in English-speaking countries for a considerable amount of time, and a few others had studied English outside of regular school curricula in Japan. Thus, they had acquired English skills advanced enough to be able to enroll in the *Advanced English* course taught twice a week for 100 minutes each time.

The course ran for a year (28 weeks) and the aim was to nurture and encourage creativity and to develop reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. In addition, the course aimed at developing the ability for students to provide logical and reasoned explanation of their views and the ability to argue and convince their peers and develop independent learning, thereby enabling them to be autonomous, collaborative, and creative. The second semester of *Advanced English course* is project based and shifts the focus of the course from academic skills to content. By virtue of my interest in Drama in Education and because the course was more focused on content, I speculated that a readers' theatre project would help me work intimately with students, placing them at the center of learning, while keeping them motivated to meet the course goals. With this in mind, the project focused on readers' theatre that combines language and skills practice to help students develop strategies for interacting with others and provides an opportunity to develop their imagination.

The choice of the participants was based on the fact that Business and International Business major students are often highly motivated to study English. The motivation often arises from their aspirations to work in global environments in Japan or abroad or obtain jobs with international organizations. Because of the high aspirations that such students have to accomplish their future career objectives, most are open and receptive to experimental project-based learning.

## Motivation for the Project

Although drama as a process-oriented method is present in Japanese education through school drama clubs, where students put on plays and performances, drama as a process-oriented approach is mostly missing within classes (Kobayashi, 2004). Drama-based language instruction has been defined by different scholars, but Holden's (Holden, 1981) definition is widely cited:

...any activity which asks the student to portray himself in an imaginary situation or another person in an imaginary situation—a definition which can be applied to most formats of drama in language teaching and includes role-play as a form of drama. However, vocal and physical exercises that do not imply the creation of a fictional character or situation, such as articulation exercises or movement games, should also be included (p.1).

Regardless of the drama-based instruction tasks implemented, they often require students to interact in pairs or groups and are aimed at helping students acquire a language skill. According to Kember (1977), when language learners take charge of their own learning, they co-construct knowledge with the instructor as a facilitator rather than becoming a class speaker. One such way students construct

knowledge with the teacher as facilitator is through readers' theatre of which Ødegaard (2003) argues that its implementation in learning places students at the center of the learning process, offering them the chance to learn through experience, with teachers taking on a facilitator role throughout the learning process.

The effectiveness of drama-based instruction for language learning was affirmed by Holden (Holden, 1981) who stated that "they help students have the opportunity to experiment with the language they have learnt, and the teacher has a chance to see how each person operates in a relatively unguided piece of interaction" (p.8). On a similar note, Via (1987) holds that drama-based instruction tasks "enable students to use what they are learning with pragmatic intent, something that is most difficult to learn through explanation" (p. 114). Drama-based tasks for language teaching could involve full-fledged performances that run from casting to rehearsal to performance, or simple ones like role plays, mime, simulation, or games. Some teachers choose to embark on more sophisticated drama-based tasks, such as process drama or readers' theatre.

This study focuses on readers' theatre, an activity in which students are not asked to memorize their lines, but to read directly from scripts, while telling a story in an entertaining manner, without props, costumes, or sets. It is an integrated teaching tool, involving students in communicative skills that includes voice projection when reading, script writing, goal oriented performance, and collaboration during group work. Although the students engaged in a readers' theater activity are not asked to memorize their lines, they are encouraged to show facial expressions and to use intonation and gestures appropriate to their characters and their characters' words. Moran (2006) summarizes readers theatre stating that:

Readers' theatre is different from traditional theatres and conventional plays as the readers (or performers) do not have to memorize lines but read directly from the scripts...costumes, scenery, props are rarely used and it can take place in any setting. Readers use their voices, facial expressions and bodies to interpret the emotions, feelings and attitude (p. 318).

The pedagogical potentials of readers' theatre for enhancing reading fluency, with appropriate tone and proper expression has been affirmed by Worthy & Prater (2002, p.295) who state that "...reading performance encourages students to read at an appropriate rate rather than to simply read fast without attending to meaning...and that when students read and interpret texts regularly, they make progress in all aspects of reading."

In the same light, Allington, (2013) underscores the usefulness of readers theatre stating it is a teaching technique that exploits students' thoughts and actions as they study a playscript to perform it. Readers' theatre parallels Vygotsky's (Vygotsky, 1978) Sociocultural Theory, which argues that an important learning by a child occurs through social interaction with a skillful tutor who models behaviors and provides verbal instructions for the child, by so doing, developing cooperative or collaborative dialogue necessary for effective communication. Readers theatre provides an authentic chance for interaction with peers while practicing and performing a play script.

## Literature Review

A review of literature found a few researchers who have covered aspects of drama-based language instruction in their teaching in Japan and have written about their experiences. In (Yoshida, 2007) *Play Building in Japanese College EFL Classrooms*, the author had students present an

adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Her objective was to have her all-female class in a women's college create a play about a historical female figure in Japan who contributed to higher education development for Japanese women. Although she tried to demonstrate how integrating play building and performance promotes student competences in language learning, her main focus seemed to be empowering her all-female class through the work of a female writer by having them empathize with the four female characters' situations in the story.

In one study, Charles & Kusanagi (2007) led workshop sessions where participants discussed activities to be performed with short feedback times between the activities. The workshop detailed the purposes of the activities, how they tapped into learning, and possible outcomes in participants' own teaching situations (Charles & Kusanagi, 2007). One activity in the workshop was role-playing characters in scripts for students to guess the adjective matching the characters being played. In groups, the students discussed adjectives describing characters and then presented in front of class for others to guess. The researchers concluded that drama-based learning were nonthreatening and classroom environments affected students' motivation toward learning. Greater self-confidence created good classroom communities because students worked collaboratively to complete tasks, thereby creating bonds between them (Charles & Kusanagi, 2007). Besides creating classroom communities, as demonstrated by Charles and Kusanagi in their study, the current study will show how working in groups on a readers' theatre project impact students' reading, writing, and presentation skills.

In another study, Araki (2007) investigated Japanese primary school students through action research and deduced that educational drama motivates Japanese students' EFL learning by providing them with opportunities for deep engagement and participation in learning. In the study, students demonstrated improvement of communicative, linguistic, nonlinguistic, and problem-solving skills necessary for learning.

Donnery (2009) described how drama-based pedagogy in the English language curriculum of a Japanese university increased student motivation and enthusiasm toward the target language. Her students made role-plays in small groups to show their comprehension of a course textbook unit. These role-plays helped the students as actors and audience engage with course content, dynamically leading them to take control of their own learning. The findings of her study suggest that students emerged more confident in their oral communication abilities and developed more consciousness of cultural issues. Friendships were also improved between Japanese students and other international students in the same class.

Leong's (2014) study was to examine whether readers' theatre has any impact on Japanese students' writing skills. In a survey the author conducted on students reaction to readers' theatre, results showed that the students displayed a positive attitude towards readers' theatre and their writing skills indicating that it lowers affective filters of Japanese learners in the EFL classroom.

The aim of the current study was to add to the literature related to drama and EFL learning in Japan by examining the impact of readers' theatre on the reinforcement of reading, writing, and presentation skills following a semester of regular textbook-based education. The aim of the current study is to address the following research questions:

- How does participating in a readers' theatre project improve students' reading, writing, and presentation skills?
- Does participation in a readers' theatre project show a shift from teacher-centered to student-centred learning?

## Description of the Project

Before the start of the study, the methodology and aims were explained to the school administration for administrative formalities, and the necessary permission to implement the study was obtained. On the first day of the project, the importance of drama and language learning was explained to the students, emphasizing the idea that the readers' theatre project was not aimed to train them to be actors but to be better language users. Students were instructed that, in readers' theatre, *process* was more important than the *product* (performance). In other words, the language skills they develop in the process of participating in the readers' theatre project is more important than a successful performance. The readers' theatre project was designed to meet the following objectives:

- prepare and perform a play to review presentation skills;
- read and discuss a play script to review reading skills;
- explore themes of a play to develop speaking skills;
- practice reading aloud and reading dramatically to communicate emotional intentions;
- develop creativity by appending a scene to a play and reviewing writing skills;
- perform in groups in front of peers to enhance oratory skills.

Following a review of the project objectives, the students were led through some language learning games to familiarize them with the concept of “acting,” as well as to introduce them to the concept of “student-centered learning” and help them see the classroom as a place to play, explore, have fun, and learn. On the importance of games in language learning and as a lead up to introducing drama work, (Wright et al., 2008) state that games provide one way for the “learner to *experience* language rather than mere *study* it.” The games used in the project were “ice breakers” and “warmers” to help learners feel comfortable with each other, confident in themselves, and focused on language while developing at the same time the notion of rhythm, group cohesion, and voice projection, all necessary for readers' theatre. These games introduced some “playfulness” into the classroom as a way of focusing the students minds on theatre as a medium of language learning.

A play by Walker (Walker, 2018) titled *Her Own Worst Enemy-A Serious Comedy About Choosing a Career*, primarily written for EFL learning, was selected as the play for the project. The choice of this play was motivated by the fact that the protagonist Aida, 18, is preparing for university and struggling with the choice of what to study and what to do as a future career. The students, all of whom are 18 or 19, had recently finished selecting on their institution and major, and thus, would more likely identify with Aida, thereby increasing their enthusiasm to participate in the project. Working in groups, students spent some lesson time discussing the title of the play, considering its idiomatic nature and responding to questions leading up to the theme of the play. Because choosing a career was the central theme of the play, students were required to conduct research on career profiles by interviewing someone or watching a YouTube video of someone with an intriguing career profile and presenting about it in class. The prompt read as follows:

*Interview a person with an interesting job or watch one on YouTube and take notes considering the following questions as a guide to develop your presentation:*

- How did you get interested in this field?
- Who influenced you?
- How did you prepare for this career?
- How did you get your first opportunity in this field?
- What do you like best about your work?

- What skills do you have?
- What advice do you have for someone who wants to do this kind of work?
- Can you share a quote or person that shaped your thinking?

Students were guided through the process of preparing and presenting a slideshow about career profiles. Following these in-class presentations, geared toward developing presentation skills, the next task was to read the play script in groups. Students were placed in groups of seven, one person for each character in the play. They read the script in groups so as to get a general idea of the plot and themes in the play. The students then answered some comprehension questions to confirm their understanding of the script. By responding to comprehension questions, the essential reading skills of skimming, scanning, and inferencing were further developed. Students were then divided into debate teams and debated the choices that the main characters made in the play. The act of debating, making arguments, and responding with counter arguments is a useful exercise to develop speaking skills.

Next, the teacher led students in a dramatic reading exercise to help them develop vocabulary through the technique of subtext. Intonation, gesture, voice projection, and facial expressions were areas emphasized during the dramatic reading process. The teacher also facilitated the dramatic reading sessions by having students highlight their parts, add descriptions of action on their scripts, delete or add lines, practice motion, and noting emotions and intonations. Dramatic reading rehearsals enabled students to “feel the language from the inside” and reflect on how sentences, words, and phrases are used to attain communication goals. Dramatic reading rehearsals culminated in a readers’ theatre performance. In this performance, the students dramatically read the scripts aloud and looked up from the script only half the time.

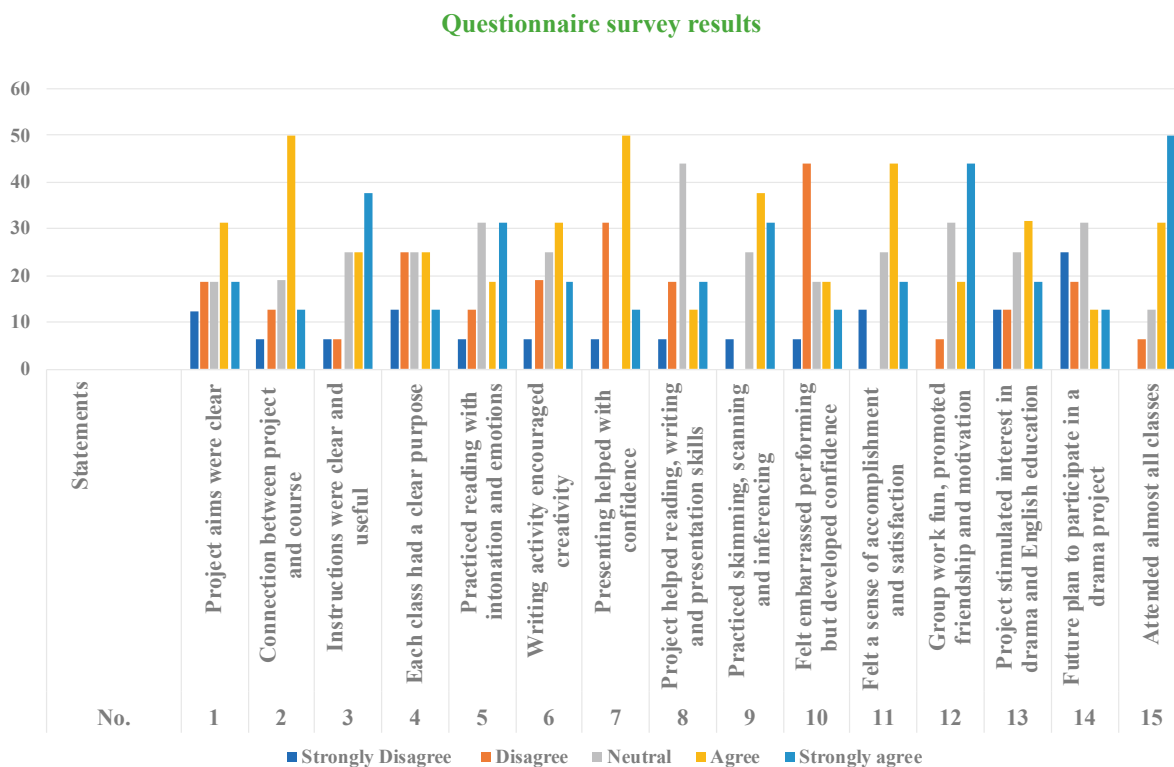
The next task involved the students, again working in groups, to append a new scene to the play. The students had to be creative to extend the story in an interesting and unique way. This task was designed to help with students’ writing, specifically writing that involves cause and effect essays. As cause and effect development of plot is key to play writing, it proved an effective and creative way of improving students’ cause and effect essay-writing skills. The teacher assisted the students in developing the plot of their new scenes during the writing process, ensuring that the ideas were structured properly and logically. In addition, the teacher made sure students included transition words to clarify the cause-and-effect relationships and encouraged students to provide supporting information based on their personal observations, reflections, and common sense. After completion of the writing process, the students rehearsed and performed their appended scenes as skits.

## **Results and Discussion**

A questionnaire survey was conducted at the end of the course to gauge students’ enthusiasm and analyze their self-assessment. The questionnaire items asked students to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree) the level of agreement they had with statements regarding how they felt about the project; if they thought they had improved their reading, writing, and presentation skills; and if they would like to try the same learning method in the near future. The questionnaire items were selected to glean useful insights toward the study’s research questions and were based on an overview of the wider Japanese English education context so as to build a more comprehensive study (Rasinger, 2010) with readers’ theatre. Feedback from students provided an emic perspective to add to the etic view to provide a more comprehensive reflection on the project’s outcomes.

**Figure 1**

shows the result of questionnaire survey conducted at the end of the readers' theatre project



The data provided by the sample of 21 students through the questionnaire survey suggest that there was a significant increase in self-perceived improvement in English communication skills so as to determine the efficacy of the outcome of readers' theatre. Potential patterns of the students' changed self-perceptions regarding their language skills following the readers' theatre project could be identified from questionnaire responses.

In response to the research question “Does readers theatre improve students reading, writing, and presentation skills?” 31% agreed and 18% strongly agreed that they could practice reading with intonation and emotions (statement 5, whereas 37% agreed and 31% strongly agreed that the project was useful for practicing skimming, scanning, and inferencing skills (statement 9), both important techniques to enhance reading skills.

It can thus be inferred that students' development of fluency in reading correlates with the theory of automaticity in reading (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Rasinski et al. (2009) define automaticity as, “the ability of proficient readers to read the words in a text correctly and effortlessly so that they may use their finite cognitive resources to attend the meaning while reading” (p. 4). Reading correctly and effortlessly can be attributed to repeated reading rehearsal as is the case with readers' theatre, which increases reading rate, accuracy, and comprehension. Repeated reading has been acknowledged by the National Reading Panel (2000) as a widely used instructional approach for building reading fluency, while Dowhower (1991) witnesses repeated readings as effective to improve reading fluency among both adult learners and primary school-age children. By spending time to read the same play repeatedly during the 14 week-long period, Advanced English course students not only made sense of different vocabulary words in the playscript but also understood the plot of the play and read it enjoyably.

Although the formality of paper formatting and word choice were not stressed in the writing

challenge, cause and effect essays were prioritized in terms of form and content. At the end of the project, 31% of students agreed and 18% strongly agreed appending a new scene to the play in groups, which in turn, stimulated their creativity and logical presentation of ideas. This can be attributed to the fact that cause and effect development of plot was central in writing an alternative ending of the play (statement 6).

Half (50%) of the students agreed and 12.5% strongly agreed that conducting slideshow presentations on career profiles, the central theme of the play, was helpful to enhance confidence while delivering presentations. (statement 7). Although 43% of students were neutral about the impact of readers' theatre in helping with the three core skills of reading, writing, and presentation, central to the Advanced English course, 12.5% agreed and 18% strongly agreed that the course impacted the course objectives positively (statement 8). Regarding the second research question, "*participation in a readers theatre project as a shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning*," 43% of students strongly agreed and 18% agreed that working in groups was fun, which in turn, promoted friendship and enhanced motivation. In addition, 43% agreed and 18% strongly agreed that they felt a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction completing a project in groups (statement 11). About working in groups as part of student-centered learning, Wright et al. (2008) asserted that while working together in English, students talk more, share their ideas, learn from each other, feel more secure and less anxious, and use English in a meaningful manner.

From the instructor's perspective, this readers' theatre project reduced teacher talk-time and dramatically empowered students to develop as self-motivated learners through peer-to-peer interactions and training. In response to statement 13, 31% agreed and 18% strongly agreed that readers' theatre stimulated their interest in drama and language learning. This project employed only one playscript and exploited various language skills for student learning. However, 14 weeks was a long time to spend on a single script. Echoing this sentiment, one student gave the following reaction: "*I think we could try one or two more stories because we kind of wasted a time for practicing the same one again and again.*" Therefore, in future, multiple scripts could be used to break the monotony, which is necessary for keeping student motivation high and would also allow for experimenting with varying language skills and engaging with a vast body of literature.

### **Limitations and Future Pedagogical Directions**

This study reported on a readers' theatre project in a 14-week *Advanced English course* held at Rikkyo University. Taken together, the results of the survey add weight to the argument that readers' theatre can be an effective pedagogical method for improving students' reading, writing, and presentation skills. There are a number of limitations.

In the current study, the sample, 21 students, is too small to extrapolate the results. Furthermore, data were gathered only through a questionnaire survey and relied on subjective self-reported measures; thus, the data collection was limited and did not allow for triangulation (Angouri, 2010). A larger study, involving a larger sample size and conducted over an extended period of time could provide stronger evidence. The current study used classroom research conducted in 14 weeks; however, a longitudinal design would be useful to provide more analytical evidence through control and experimental groups.

Limited information was found in the literature regarding readers' theatre and EFL learning in Japan. This area needs to be explored in further studies; however, the findings of this study highlight the potential of readers' theatre-based teaching method for motivating students' to study English and



build their confidence as English communicators , in addition to enhancing reading, writing, speaking, and presentation skills. The readers' theatre project, like other drama-based teaching methods, could be a leverage to raise student interest in language study; however, it has a distinct advantage over other forms of drama wherein it allows the actors (students) to read from a script and is not focused on memorization of lines. This not only makes it more accessible and less intimidating for language learners of all levels but also has the potential to open access to a bigger corpus of scripts, thereby allowing students to encounter different playwrights and learn more about the fascinating world of theater.

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