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Reader's Theater: A Pronunciation Practice Activity for Oral Fluency and Prosodic Improvement

One technique that teachers should consider using with students at higher levels of proficiency is that of reader's theater. The use of this technique in speaking classes for children and adults can help improve not only learners' oral reading skills, but also their oral fluency and pronunciation.

What is reader's theater?

Reader's theater was initially developed to help children build oral reading skills (Corcoran, 2005), including reading fluency (Millin & Rinehart, 1999). In this technique, a conversational script is created for multiple characters in which the dialogue either tells a story or works to resolve a point of conflict. Because this technique has frequently been used with children, most scripts have been based on fairy tales or folklore (Ng, 2008). (See <https://www.readinga-z.com/fluency/readers-theater-scripts/?ppcConversionLabel>); for sample readers' theater scripts for grade levels 1-5). In dramatizing the script, each student assumes the persona of one of the characters, using facial expressions, hand gestures, and spoken language to convey emotion consistent with his or her character's personality (Tanner & Chugg, 2018, p. 185). Participants practice the script over the course of several days, with the teacher providing feedback in much the same way that a director would to actors, helping them convey their lines clearly and with appropriate timing and emotion. The script does not have to be memorized, but participants should be very familiar with their lines so they are not reading it directly off the page. When presented, the group stands before the class or a larger audience and shares the overall conversation with each character communicating his or her lines just as a multi-person conversation would flow together.

What are the benefits of reader's theater for pronunciation practice?

Reader's theater is highly interactive, allowing participants to practice voice flexibility, careful articulation, proper pronunciation, and projection (Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2010). Research has also shown that reader's theater can help learners improve their ability to create meaning in English as well as develop reading fluency and confidence (Young & Rasinski, 2009, p. 11). Reader's theater has further been used to improve English language learners' speaking fluency and accuracy (Liu, 2000; Tsou, 2011). In addition, performers do not have to worry about moving about a stage or using costumes or extensive props (Moran, 2006).

A further benefit of reader's theater is that it can be used in speaking classes to help learners develop conversational abilities with a focus on oral fluency and appropriate use of suprasegmentals and segmentals. The focus on conversation emphasizes the co-constructed discourse of normal talk where two or more interlocutors initiate and respond to a changing variety of topics (Levis & Grant, 2003, p. 17). The dialogue can also provide practice in conversational style, suitable grammar and vocabulary, idiomatic use, and speech acts. This controlled practice activity offers an opportunity to combine speech rhythm, focus, and intonation with facial gestures and hand and body movement (Levis & Grant, 2003).

In an action research study by Tanner and Chugg (2018), 12 adult English language learners practiced and performed four different reader's theater scripts specifically designed for this course over a 14-week semester. Each script was based on a topic from the course textbook and incorporated vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and emotive language centering on a complex issue, such as academic honesty. After reading through the script with the class, learners were assigned a particular character. They then listened to a native English speaker read the script and marked their particular lines for word and phrase stress, pausing, and intonation. (A script read by a highly proficient L2 user would work as well – see Meyers' essay on mirroring on this website). Students were given 10 minutes a day three to four times a week for three weeks to rehearse their lines individually or in conversations with their small groups of four people. During this time, they received feedback from the teacher on their portrayal of the character's personality (emotions and facial gestures), discourse features (conversational fluency, timing, and turn-taking), prosodic accuracy (thought groups, pausing, stress, and intonation), voice (vocal quality, energy, and volume), and use of segmentals. At the end of the three weeks, each group performed the script for their classmates. The performances were videotaped for individual analysis and teacher feedback.

Focus group data from the participants attested to the fun and interactive nature of the activity, which they felt built their confidence in speaking English and provided focused practice on critical pronunciation elements they needed to improve. When compared to other activities in the class, the learners ranked readers' theater as 8.5 out of 10.

Tips for script creation and rehearsal

Script creation. The following recommendations are given for creating scripts:

1. The script topic should be integrated with course material, including key vocabulary, grammar, and idiomatic expressions.
2. The topic should be authentic and relevant to the learners' situational use of the language, such as friends negotiating where to go for a dinner out on the town.
3. The script length should allow for a minimum of six to eight turns per speaker and should include four to five characters of different genders, personalities, and ages.
4. The script should seek to resolve a conflict that is present among the characters.

Script rehearsal. In the speaking class, begin by introducing learners to the basic elements of pronunciation: intonation, thought groups, focus words, final sounds, linking, and speech rhythm (Miller, 2006). Once learners are aware of these features in discourse, the script can be introduced, characters can be assigned and analyzed, scripts can be marked for prosodic features, and individuals and groups can practice the conversation inside and outside the classroom. Classroom practice is accompanied by teacher feedback. The teacher may also want to provide an assessment rubric that can be used to evaluate learners' verbal and nonverbal performance such as rate of speech, volume, vocal expression, eye contact, and facial gestures as they progress from one script to the next.

Reader's theater is a dramatic technique that can provide language learners an opportunity to practice real-life scenarios they may encounter, enabling them to become more confident and

fluent in their communication (Burke & O’Sullivan, 2002) as well as improving linguistic and paralinguistic features present in conversational discourse (Tanner & Chugg, 2018, p. 192).

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