

A Classroom Practice for Reader's Theater: Based on the Story Behind *Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree*

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Abstract

As a language teaching method, Reader's Theater has been applied widely and effectively in EFL classrooms. This article gives a brief introduction about the theory of Reader's Theater and presents a classroom practice which covers the whole process of the activity. The purpose of the practice is to enhance the overall and integrated language ability for the students (with speaking ability in particular), as well as their interest in English learning and the engagement in the classroom. The teacher accumulates some practical experience as how to put the theory into practice. It is hoped that the practice conducted will do some help to other fellow teachers who are trying to apply Reader's Theater in their own classroom.

Key words: Classroom practice; English teaching; Reader's theater

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1. THEORY FOR READER'S THEATER THEORETICAL ORIENTATION ON DRAMA, GENESIS OF THE PROJECT

Reader's Theater is an oral presentation of drama, prose or poetry by two or more readers.

Readers first read and familiarize themselves with the original text, then transform it into a script involving several characters. The script is then prepared and performed for

an intended audience (Patrick, 2008). Reader's Theater is a rich social activity that learners enjoy. It offers "built in" scaffolding in the form of scripts and inspires practice through meaningful repetition and fosters development of a learner's external and internal "reader's voice". It strengthens both oral and reading fluency (Karen). Guided by that theory, the following is a classroom practice for Reader's Theater with the script transformed from a text.

2. THE PROCEDURES OF READER'S THEATER

2.1 Select the Text

The original text is the story behind a famous hit-*Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree*- which was originally used as listening material for freshmen to consolidate past participles. After the students have fulfilled the assigned task, some background knowledge about the song and the story was offered. They enjoyed the video of the song and explored more details about the story behind the song before they got familiar with the text and have a better understand of it. Although the first thing for students is to understand the text, with literature introduced the teaching purpose of this part is to improve students' interest in English learning.

Original text: omitted.

2.2 Transform the Text Into a Script

The teacher transformed the text into different versions of script, which were offered to the students. The students have the right to choose a ready-made script and adapt it or rewrite a new script tailored to the group according to the number, the interests and the need of the group. All the scripts are omitted with the main information being listed below. After the fulfillment of the screenwriting initial casting takes place. In this part the students will be guided to focus on writing and critical thinking, as well as a better understanding of the text.

Title: Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree.
GENRE: classic literature
CULTURE: American
THEME: love, support
READERS: 7-10 (a driver, the husband, the wife, a son and a daughter, a reporter and several passengers)
READER AGES: 19-21
LENGTH: within 10 minutes

2.3 Practice and Explore

The students read the script several times as a group, with each member reading his or her part according to the character chosen. While reading, they correct the pronunciation with one another or with the help of a dictionary and the teacher. After they have become familiar with their own character, they are asked to exchange the script one time or more with one another and go on with their reading so as to experience a new part and have a better understanding of the script as a whole. By doing so, they students are supposed to explore the deep meaning of the script and do a better job for their own part. Getting fluency is the main purpose in this part.

2.4 Practice and Improve

After the students can pronounce every word in the script clearly and accurately, they have a rehearsal in front of the teacher. The teacher corrects their pronunciation problems if any, and highlights some important details for the students to better understand each character by paying attention to the punctuation and pausing, intonation, repetition, volume of voice etc. In addition, the students are encouraged to use facial expressions and gestures at the point. By doing so, the students are supposed to further improve their fluency and get familiar with their lines.

2.5 Practice and Performance

Although Reader's Theater doesn't require costumes or set, the students are encouraged to use illustrations and everything at hand to create possible set to support their activity. Based on the script, the students draw an oak tree on the blackboard covered with hundreds of yellow ribbons. They rearrange the desks and chairs to transform the classroom into something of a bus which is the core set in the story. They play the song Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree as their background music. They even style their hair and dress according to the character. After all those things are in place, they give a face-to-face performance in turns. After class they are required to submit digital performance or shoot a short video. Their videos are marked in the form of a competition within the class and the best one will be displayed in different classes of the same teacher. It is expected that the overall ability of the students will be enhanced in this part.

2.6 Evaluate and Feedback

After the best groups from the different classes are collected, the teacher will ask students as audience to enjoy and evaluate the performance of their peers according to the rubrics the teacher provided, which mainly evaluates the proper voice and clarity, intonation and pronunciation, pace and pause, accuracy and fluency, facial expressions and body languages, the resemblance to the character, cooperation between members, be enthusiastic and have fun, background music, setting, etc. At last, each individual will give a brief summary about what she or he has got by participating the activity via UMOOC, a platform the students use daily and from which the teacher can get the specific feedback of the students.

2.7 Summarize and Prospect

Based on the classroom observation and the feedback from the students a conclusion is drawn. Reader's theater is an authentic and motivating way to support meaningful reading. It brings positive change in the classroom. At the language level, it helps improve students oral English and reading fluency, built up their vocabulary, grasp phrasing and experience stage directions. In a word, Reader's Theater supports integrative learning, and according to the theory of Dale-Cone of Learning-the result of learning remains a longer time. At non-language level, Reader's Theater is a confidence-builder for English language learners. Some quiet or shy students become more interactive and passionate. It provides opportunities for students to create and imagine, some students reveal their unique talents or interests in performance or directing. They have fun together and new friendship emerges among them naturally. It helps the students realize the meaning of mentorship. The teacher will feel more listened and understood, which will help the future teaching. In a word, Reader's Theater could be adapted for long-term performance-oriented use; it is an effective way to apply in English teaching. Besides, there are also some potential benefits that could be gained from the activity. Children use these combined linguistic resources to learn consistently, they benefit cognitively, socially and personally (Blackledge and Creese, 2010).

2.8 Questions to Be Cared

In screenwriting, scaffolding is an important element provided, meanwhile, open-ended stories should also be considered so as to encourage engagement. The language of each script should be at a range of levels, so diverse students all learn and succeed. The script might not be adapted from classic literature or great authors, but being funny are an important factor. In performance, enough guided practice should be guaranteed so as to ensure effective time spending and a

successful final performance. Although practice should always be emphasized, too much pushing should be avoided. Besides, the whole process should be learner-centered with peers directing one another, emphasizing both individual differences and cooperative learning. Although the students spend some time on performance, the focus should always be language learning. Students learn language strategies by the activity, they learn the language by using the language in an authentic way, they learn knowledge of social and cultural issues related to their language learning. Last but not the least, they set realistic expectations and create a vision for success in language learning.

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