



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**ESL AND TESL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE IMPORTANCE
OF USING READERS THEATRE IN TEACHING LITERATURE**

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ABSTRACT

ESL AND TESL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE IMPORTANCE OF USING READERS THEATRE IN TEACHING LITERATURE

Norhayati binti Husain

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of ESL and TESL students in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) towards the importance of using Readers Theatre in Teaching Literature. It also to determine ESL and TESL students' understandings of Readers Theatre, to identify the ESL and TESL students' perceptions on the importance of using Readers Theatre, and to discover the challenges that ESL and TESL students might perceive in implementing Readers Theatre. 128 participants from the ESL and TESL programme, Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development were involved in this study and data was collected through questionnaire. Data collected was analyzed by using SPSS 15.0. The findings of the study indicated that majority of the ESL and TESL students showed positive attitudes towards Readers Theatre. Majority of the students understand the main concepts of readers Theatre although some of the students have misconception in Readers Theatre. The findings also indicated the challenges that ESL and TESL students might perceive in implementing Readers Theatre whereas the challenge of time consuming was the major reason that caused them hesitate to use this technique in teaching literature.

ABSTRAK

PERSEPSI PELAJAR ESL DAN TESL TERHADAP KEPENTINGAN MENGUNAKAN TEATER PEMBACA DALAM PENGAJARAN KESUSASTERAAN

Norhayati binti Husain

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki persepsi pelajar ESL dan TESL Universiti Malaysia Sarawak terhadap kepentingan menggunakan Teater Pembaca dalam pengajaran kesusasteraan. Ia juga menentukan pemahaman pelajar ESL dan TESL mengenai Teater Pembaca, mengenal pasti persepsi pelajar ESL dan TESL terhadap kepentingan menggunakan Teater Pembaca dan mencari cabaran-cabaran yang mungkin dihadapi oleh pelajar ESL dan TESL dalam pelaksanaan Teater Pembaca. 128 orang peserta dari program ESL dan TESL, Fakulti Sains Kognitif dan Pembangunan Manusia telah terlibat dalam kajian ini dan data telah dikumpul melalui soal selidik. Data terkumpul dianalisa menggunakan SPSS 15.0. Hasil kajian menunjukkan majoriti pelajar ESL dan TESL mempamerkan sikap positif terhadap Teater Pembaca. Kebanyakan pelajar memahami konsep-konsep utama Teater Pembaca walaupun terdapat kesalahfahaman konsep mengenai Teater Pembaca. Hasil kajian turut menunjukkan cabaran-cabaran yang mungkin dihadapi oleh pelajar ESL dan TESL dalam pelaksanaan Teater Pembaca manakala cabaran peruntukan masa adalah cabaran utama yang menyebabkan mereka teragak-agak untuk menggunakan teknik ini dalam pengajaran kesusasteraan.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL	English as a Second Language
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language
ELL	English Language Learner
UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
FCSHD	Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
PKPG	Program Khas Pensiswazahan Guru
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
IRI	Informal Reading Inventories
LEP	Limited English Proficient
RT	Readers Theatre

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter provides the background of the study in order to connect ideas with the present study. Apart from that, it also states the purposes of the study, which are to determine ESL and TESL students' understandings of Readers Theatre, to identify the ESL and TESL students' perceptions on the importance of using Readers Theatre, and to discover the challenges that ESL and TESL students might perceive in implementing Readers Theatre.

1.2 Background of the study

Readers Theatre is a teaching technique to interpret literary work such as poem, short stories and other genres. It is recommended as a technique to be used in ESL literature classroom as it would benefit the students and it appears to be a practical and efficient tool in teaching literature. Teachers find Readers Theatre easy to use because it involves little preparation and cost, requires no dramatic expertise, needs minimal props, and can be done practically everywhere.

In Readers Theatre, students are assigned roles which include the narrator and each of the characters in the text. According to Groff (1978), the roles in a play are read by the individual performers with little of the staging that normally accompanies conventional theatres. Rather than memorizing dialogue, the performers in Readers Theatre read from the hand-carried scripts. The readers sit or stand and used their voices, rather than action, to focus their attention (and that of any audience) on the ideas of the literature. Facial expressions and body movement are restricted and suggestive.

Therefore, the aim of the literature component in English Language Curriculum for Secondary Syllabus highlights the intentions to enhance students' proficiency in English language through the study of prescribed literary texts. Students are expected to engage in wider reading of good works for enjoyment and for self-development. However, this study suggests that the study of prescribed literary texts using Readers Theatre will be able to contribute to personal development and character building, and broaden students' outlook through reading about other cultures and world views.

The literature component in English Language Curriculum for Secondary Schools has outlined three areas of language use. These areas of language use are the Interpersonal, the Informational and the Aesthetic. The learning outcomes of the Aesthetic purposes is to expect students to be able to follow a story line, understand the poem and recognized elements in the three genres in short story, novels and poetry and give personal response to the text.

Since in aesthetic reading the experience is primary, this is where a classroom approach should begin and language usage should be explored only to the extent that it is relevant to that experience (Mckay, 1982, cited in Brumfit and Carter, 1986). Consequently, Readers Theatre is an aesthetic classroom presentation to interpret literary text and encourage students to express themselves creatively and imaginatively.

The language teachers can effectively foster aesthetic development by including Readers Theatre in the language programme activities in literature classes.

Knight and Howard (1990), further explain that communication skills are enhanced as children become cognizant of voice projection, appropriate inflection, and accurate pronunciation of words. Children become familiar with new words and extend their vocabulary. Effective scripts often employ language with rich imagery to help the audience better imagine the scene. As such, Readers Theatre is ideal for developing communication skills and generating creative thinking among the learners.

Furthermore, Readers Theatre exposes students to a wide variety of quality literature and gives them an opportunity to share their creativity with others. Knight and Howard (1990) point out that as children plan and work together on specific Readers Theatre scripts, they have opportunities to evidence respect for the opinions of others and recognize the value of cooperative activity.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

However, Readers Theatre is seldom recommended as a technique to be incorporated in a classroom. One possible explanation for this is that Readers Theatre is often regarded as a form of theatrical performance in creative drama (Bolton, 1986, cited in Liu, 2000), rather than a variation in a drama process (Bolton 1986, O'Neil and Lambert 1982, cited in Liu, 2000:354). Liu (2000) further mentions that, as a result, the language teachers sometimes feel intimidated in using this technique due to their lack of artistic training in theatre and/or their concern about the physical constraints of the classroom.

Thus, some of the teachers are being influenced by the misconceptions about Readers Theatres which includes the beliefs such as students must memorize their parts and scripts are difficult to locate and adapt. The teachers are required to spend a great deal of time and preparation to successfully execute this programme. However, Ratliff (2001) suggests that some thought should be given to the educational role that Readers Theatre might play in classroom performance as well. The learning process is traditionally enriched when performers are challenged beyond some degree of their individual skills, or when they are provided challenging opportunities to cultivate imaginative “new” aural or visual skills.

Students may find it difficult to comprehend the multiple levels of meaning in the literary text. Literary texts are often rich on multiple levels of meaning which demand the students to apply critical thinking skills in order to form hypothesis, drawing inferences and making interpretation of the meaning. Therefore, Readers Theatre is one instructional strategy a teacher can use to help the students to unravel the multiple levels of meaning in the literary text. According to Ratliff (2001), one basic principle of Readers Theatre is to provide a creative stimulus for the students who may be unaccustomed to using imagination to interpret literary works in a classroom setting.

Nevertheless, the teachers might have different views and perceptions towards the importance of using Readers Theatre in literature classroom by taking account of their experiences and preferred teaching techniques. Realizing the importance of using Readers Theatre in literature classroom as mentioned above, this study is attended to find out the ESL and TESL students’ perception towards the importance of using Readers Theatre in teaching literature.

1.4 Aim and Objectives of the Study

As mentioned earlier, Readers Theatre is one of the techniques that educators can implement in schools, since it has promised a positive outcome to learning and teaching. Many researchers has been done on the effects on Readers Theatre (Kozub, 2000; Liu 2001; Sun, 2007), but less are done on what actually are the ESL and TESL students' perceptions on the importance of using Readers Theatre in teaching literature. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the ESL and TESL student's perceptions on the importance of using Readers Theatre in Teaching Literature.

The purposes of this study are as follow:

1. To determine ESL and TESL students' understandings of Readers Theatre.
2. To identify the ESL and TESL students' perceptions on the importance of using Readers Theatre.
3. To discover the challenges that ESL and TESL students might perceive in implementing Readers Theatre.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of the study can serve as one of the ways for teachers to realise the importance of using Readers Theatre in teaching literature. It can also provide the teachers and other education practitioners a new insight into the use of Readers Theatre in the ESL literature classroom. In practical, the finding of the study can be a source of reference and translated into pedagogical practice for educational practitioners, particularly in the teaching of English language and literature subjects. For example, the findings of the study can serve as one of the basis references for TESL lecturers to be aware on what and how the students actually perceived Readers Theatre in learning and teaching literature.

Thus, the findings of the study could give some ideas to those who involved in the process of incorporating Readers Theatre in literature classroom, to take the necessary steps, as to ensure its delivery effectiveness. Lastly, it is also to meet one of the objectives of the syllabus, that is in using drama and role-play in learning literature (Ministry of Education, 2003).

1.6 Operational Definition of Terms

The following definition is given to the terms based on the purpose of the study.

1.6.1 Perception

Campbell (1967) defines that perceptions is closely related about something that is being observed and what is and what is said about it. It is a process where one will form an impression about someone or something. It is formed close observation that will be stared as added information which in turn will be based on its suitability. The perception in this study refers to TESL and ESL student's interpretation and impression towards the importance of using Readers Theatre in teaching literature and what they belief and value of using Readers Theatre as a teaching technique in literature classes.

1.6.2 Readers Theatre

Ratliff (2001) defines Readers Theatre as a technique to 'dramatize' literature in classroom performance and to provide a visual and oral stimulus to students to appreciate literary text. Readers Theatre focuses on helping students think about how to read the literary text to best represent the meaning. This study suggests that Readers Theatre has the potential to become valuable technique in language teaching and learning. Once this technique has been made used of in the literature classroom,

teachers and students will find that Readers Theatre leads to a deeper appreciation of language, content, and the process of learning literature

1.7 Scope of the study

The study will be based on one of the tertiary institution in Malaysia, which is in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). This study only focuses on ESL and TESL students. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the other programmes in UNIMAS and other universities. The ESL and TESL students' perceptions is solely based on the importance of using Reader Theatre in teaching literature. Thus, this result cannot be based on to make generalization on the importance of using other methods of teaching literature.

1.8 Chapter Review

This chapter provided the background of the study and introduced the present study. Three objectives were stated in the purpose of this study, which were to determine ESL and TESL students' understandings of Readers Theatre, to identify the ESL and TESL students' perceptions on the importance of using Readers Theatre, and to discover the challenges that ESL and TESL students might perceive in implementing Readers Theatre. Apart from that, this chapter also presented the significance of the study and the definitions of key terms that will be used in the present study. The scope of the study was also explained in this chapter.

The next chapter will discuss on the introduction of Readers Theatre, the importance of Readers Theatre, the implementation of Readers Theatre and related studies to the present research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Preview

This study is to find out the ESL and TESL students' perceptions towards the importance of using Readers Theatre in teaching literature. This chapter will present the introduction of Readers Theatre, the importance of Readers Theatre, the implementation of Readers Theatre and related studies to the present research.

2.2 Introduction to Readers Theatre

According to Ratliff (2001), traditional definitions of Readers Theatre suggest that (1) the performers of literary texts should give vivid life and meaning to the experience described by the author; (2) the audience should be stimulated to share in the intellectual or emotional content suggested in literary texts; and (3) both the performers and the audience should actively engage their imagination to awaken literary texts from their leather-bound slumber. In relation to this definition, Readers Theatre is often regarded as a staged reading of literature that emphasizes the importance of literary text.

However, there have also been a number of attempts to define Readers Theatre as a group performance that presents a literary text to an audience using selected oral interpretation techniques. Knight and Howard (1990), define Readers Theatre as a presentation by two or more participants who read from scripts and interpret a literary work in such a way that the audience imaginatively senses characterization, setting, and action. Voice and body tension rather than movement are involved, thus eliminating the need for the many practice sessions that timing and action techniques require in the presentation of play. In other words, Readers Theatre can be described as a performance vehicle that uses scripts, suggested characterization and limited action. Thus, it works as reading teaching tool that can deepen comprehension and develop expression.

Readers Theatre introduces the element of drama into literary learning and transforms the classroom into stage. Readers Theatre is defined as a dramatic approach to literature, creative oral reading of literature that involves ‘theatre’ (White, 1993 cited in Liu 2000: 354). It enables students to bring a text to life and together create a powerful interpretation. Although it is possible to develop a drama experience into a play to be performed for an external audience, Readers Theatre enables students to develop cognitive and aesthetic learning as they engage with narrative text.

Robert (1974) states that dramatic interpretation is a way of studying literature through the oral and physical creation and re-creation of the literary work. One form of interpretation is Readers Theatre, which generally speaking, is performance of literature by a group. This can include a group of individual readings in a poetry program, as well as ensemble reading and making interpretation from a story or a play. Through this activity, students will be able to engage in a collaborative social setting and provide them an amusement to appreciate literature while working together.

Choral or unison reading may also be a part of Readers Theatre. Choral reading involves students reading aloud in chorus, forming a kind of ‘speech choir’. This is often used to ‘bring alive’ a poem. Like a singing choir, students can be grouped according to their speaking voices- low, medium or high (Nesamalar, Saratha & Teh, 1995). Meanwhile, in Readers Theatre, students rehearse and perform a play for peers or others. They read from scripts that have been derived from books that are rich in dialogue. Students play characters who speak lines or a narrator who shares necessary background information.

Ratliff (2000) further mentions that for the most part, however, the first fruits of Readers Theatre performance and production were “staged readings” that emphasized the oral interpretation of non-dramatic literary texts presented by a small ensemble of “readers” performing multiple character roles. As a consequence of this performance, students become more sensitive readers. They become meaningfully engaged in the process of creative and critical thinking. Furthermore, it also increases their awareness of voice, diction and dialogue while presenting the text to the audience

2.3 The Importance of Using Readers Theatre

Readers Theatre is a motivating technique which allows students to practice language in unique way. It offers less confident students support from peers and provide motivation by using language in a communicative and authentic context rather than merely in an academic setting. Knight and Howard (1999) stated that many children fear the experience of standing alone in front of their peers and sharing information. The opportunity to read while seated in a shared presentation, without the audience’s attention being constantly focused on one person, helps develop confidence and poise. Thus, for many struggling readers, the motivating factor is very strong and critical component of helping them develop into fluent readers.

Readers Theatre is one of instructional strategy a teacher can use to achieve oral language fluency in his/her students. Reader Theatre can be defined as the oral interpretation of literature presented by readers who bring forth the full expression of the literature through their oral reading (Kelleher, 1997, cited in Kozub, 2000). Oral reading helps students realize that reading is a natural part of life and that it is a language process related to writing and speaking (Kozub, 2000). In addition to this, students will also develop and improve their listening comprehension and vocabularies.

Readers Theatre promotes students the opportunity to develop writing skills through scripting. According to Knight and Howard (1990), scripting affords many opportunities to develop writing skills. In developing these scripts, students cultivate different aspects of writing such as summarizing, editing and creative writing. The class can use dialogues contained in the text. However, the classroom teacher or students can work together in producing scripts for Readers Theatre. The scripts can be extracted directly from the Literature component textbooks. Kozub (2000) points out that script of quality writing serve as models for students own writing. Students enjoy the activity and are willing to spend the time to read, write and use critical thinking skills.

Furthermore, Liu (2000) further elaborates that in Readers Theatre, meanings of a given text are constructed and/or reconstructed through dramatic exploration, which invites creativity and imagination, and does not conform to one style. Students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of both the content and the language of the text at hand while simultaneously drawing upon their listening, speaking and reading facilities. Students are engaged in negotiating the meaning of text, exchanging the interpretation of texts and generate responses through dramatic classroom activities (Kao and O'Neil 1998, Liu 1988, Liu and Miller 1998, cited in Liu, 2000:354).

As a group activity, Readers Theatre promotes cooperation between teachers and students, and the responsibility for success is shared equally by all members of the class. It helps students to become sensitive to the needs of others and respect their efforts. Knight and Howard (1990) state that as children plan and work together on specific Readers Theatre scripts, they have opportunities to evidence respect for the opinions of others and recognize the value of cooperative activity.

The benefits of Readers Theatre are not limited to those students with a high level of speaking proficiency. Instead, students of all levels can participate in this activity which involves participation from the entire class. Kozub (2000) elaborates that Readers Theatre invites students to listen to and enjoy the written word, as well as providing an opportunity for non-proficient and proficient readers to work together.

2.4 The Implementation of Readers Theatre

In Readers Theatre, students are assigned roles which include the narrator and each of the characters in the text. Using only the features of voice such as intonation, pitch stress, pause; the text is read aloud dramatically to convey the full meaning of the lines. It is useful to discuss the gist of the texts and the traits and motives of the different characters before launching into a reading of the text (Nesamalar, Saratha & Teh, 1997). The discussion affords the students the opportunities to further extend not only the appreciation of literature, but also improve the language usage. Thus, Knight and Howard (1990) further elaborate that such discussions may heighten each reader's sensitivity to the script, to the role of each character, and to the emotional involvement desired for the audience.

Seating is an important consideration in presentation technique. The arrangement of the characters on the stage can be means by which the audience sees character relationships. The readers may be seated on the floor, on stool, or on chairs. For some scripts, positioning a leading character in the centre on a stool will indicate importance (Knight and Howard, 1990). Readers Theatre does require students to memorize their lines as they rehearse scripts from the presentation for the whole class. The participants in Readers Theatre interpret a literary work in such a way that makes the audience imaginatively senses characterization, setting, and action.

Since the audience participates imaginatively, no costuming, make-up, scenery, or stage movement is required. If a scarf or hat or a certain colour or clothes will allow the audience more easily to identify the reader as a given character, such a costume suggestion is appropriate but not essential (Knight and Howard, 1990). However, the students have to keep movement to a minimum level and include gestures and facial expressions. In addition, Ratliff (2001) points out that theatrical production element like lightning, projections, music, sound, or special effects are now being used effectively in classroom staging to suggest the setting of a literary text; or to provide additional aural and visual commentary on the author's apparent theme.

Script for Readers Theatre can be adapted from a wide range of materials; but if the purpose is to introduce children to quality literature, then literary excellence is an important consideration (Knight and Howard, 1990). In addition, scripts for Readers Theatre can be adapted from literary texts in Literature component textbooks prescribed by the Ministry of Education. It gives advantages to the students to deepen their comprehension since they have been familiar with the texts while learning in the literature classroom. Furthermore, the classroom teacher or students can work together in producing scripts for Readers Theatre. As such, Readers Theatre promotes cooperative interaction with teacher and students and makes the reading task more appealing.