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Integrating language processes through readers theater

VICTORIA Y. HSUI

Introduction

An integrated curriculum in language learning links reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, and vocabulary within broad units of organization. Students learn language, learn through language, learn about language (Halliday, 1979), and learn to think through language in a continuous and expanding process that links classroom with real-life, hands-on experiences. In a curriculum that is driven by a holistic, integrative approach, students "learn to talk by talking, comprehend oral language by listening, write by writing, and read by reading" (Goodman, Smith, Meridith, Goodman, 1987, p. 7).

Readers theater has been used successfully in language and literature programs that are based on integrative and holistic approaches. Readers theater activities "enhance readiness, vocabulary, development, oral reading skills, reading comprehension, and self-concept, from kindergarten through at least junior high school" (Secondary 1 and 2) (Miller & Mason, 1983, p. 129). The flexibility of readers theater is such that students of a wide range of age groups and levels of proficiency can benefit from, and enjoy it. Even beginning readers and writers can participate successfully in readers theater. At the upper level of schooling, tenth graders (Secondary 4) and even twelfth graders have engaged in readers theater successfully. The key to the effective use of readers theater lies in a judicious selection of materials as well as in effective planning by the teacher.

Characteristics of Readers Theater

Readers theater has been called "theater of the mind" primarily because the audience participates in interpreting plot, action,

Reading Materials for Readers Theater

Table 2. Materials for Readers Theater

Children's stories	Basal readers	Serious fiction	Newspapers	Social studies
Nursery rhymes	Big books	Popular fiction	Magazines	Science
Fairy tales		Biographies		History
Folktales		Plays		
Fables		Poems		

Most reading materials (see Table 2), whole or in part, that have a clear focus in setting, plot, and characterization are suitable for readers theater. Preferably, these materials are ones that grab the reader's attention, that move rapidly to a resolution, and that have a surprise or twist at the end. For everyday use in the classroom, shorter texts or selected parts of longer texts are recommended.

For younger students, it is appropriate to start with children's stories (or specific episodes of stories) that the teacher has read with the students, such as those in big books. Once the children have learned to recast these, they can move on to recasting more challenging materials, like folktales, fables, poems, fairy tales, and nursery rhymes. Selected stories from basal readers and textbooks can also be used for readers theater.

For older students, any text that is used in language and literature classes, or recommended for pleasure and enrichment reading can be used for readers theater. Examples of these reading materials are: short stories, episodes from serious and popular novels, folktales, fables, poems, real and imagined events and stories from newspapers and magazines, and excerpts from plays. For integrating content across the curriculum, stories and events encountered in social studies, science, and history provide valuable sources of materials for readers theater.

Material Selection

For a start, the teacher is the one who is mainly involved in material selection. When students become more well-versed with

readers theater, they can be given more responsibility in deciding on materials and the adaptations that appeal to them. In material selection, analyze the original to see whether it is suitable for readers theater by considering the following:

- Is the material readily adaptable for readers theater? For beginners, the material should have a strong story line and only a few characters, and should move rapidly to a resolution.
- Is it appropriate for the students? The interest of the students, their age, and their proficiency levels are prime considerations in deciding on appropriacy of materials.
- Is the number of characters right? There should be the right number of characters to ensure that everyone in a team takes a speaking part. If there are too many or too few characters, consider whether characters can be added or deleted. The rule of the thumb is not to have too many characters for each team – the maximum number that is recommended is four characters to a four-member team.
- Is the story of a good, workable length? If the story is too long, consider what to leave out, and if it is too short, consider what can be added.

Adapting Materials for Readers Theater

Reading materials can be adapted in many ways for readers theater. The most controlled adaptation is to recast, following closely to the original text in tone and content. This is useful as an ongoing, everyday classroom activity and shorter texts are usually used. This adaptation achieves many of the purposes of readers theater in the least amount of time, thereby enabling the frequent use of readers theater in the classroom. Specifically, this adaptation consolidates student understanding of original texts and offers them an opportunity to explore different genres of writing through recasting one genre into another, for example, a poem or short story into

dialogue. Students will learn how to make modifications to the style and content of the original when recasting it.

Other ways of adapting the original material are suggested to broaden the scope of readers theater in the classroom. Adaptations, used judiciously, offer challenge, allow students to think divergently and to create original ideas, while working within the structure offered by a text or a thematic unit of study.

The following are suggestions for adapting reading materials:

- Recast into dialogue, with the new text being identical in style, content, and tone to the original text. In this instance, students explore different genres of writing and learn to use dialogue appropriately. They can make slight modifications to the content to accommodate the needs of dialogue.
- Write parallel plays. In writing parallel plays, the theme/themes and main characters of the original are kept intact. As far as possible, the main plot is also maintained. The parallel play may have one or two of the following adaptations:
 - The new text may have a different time period (e.g. from a 1900 era to an imaginative time in the future), or a different physical setting (e.g. from a third-rate hotel to a stiff, upper-class environment). The new text may employ reversal of roles (e.g. a character who is a villain in the original text becomes a victim in the adapted one and vice versa). Characters may be different in age, status, and motivations, from those in the original text. Subplots can be added, changed, or deleted in the new text.
- Write an ending that is different from the original. This adaptation allows students to think divergently and to elaborate on this thinking by generating details for an ending that is different from the original text. Ideas for different endings include: a different twist (ironical,

unexpected, or shocking), a happy ending instead of a tragic one and vice versa, a comical ending instead of a serious one and vice versa.

- Provide part of a story and students continue it. In this adaptation, the initial part of a text is provided for students. Based on this part of the text, students continue writing, using the same characters, adding others, and creating a closure to the story. This adaptation develops originality as students create and elaborate on ideas, synthesizing their own with those of the original text.
- Change the author's purpose and tone. In this adaptation, students think divergently, providing content that differs from the author's purpose, and elaborating on it by reference to particular episodes of the original text. Students can take a point of view or a stand that differs from the author's. For example, to an issue such as suicide, if the author reveals a tendency to glorify it, the adaptation can take a point of view that reveals the converse. The adaptation can also change the tone of the original, from a serious, didactic one, for example, to a light-hearted, comical one.
- Write a play based on the themes of the original text or a thematic unit in the language curriculum. In this adaptation, students write a short play, a sketch, or a longer play, bearing out the themes in a text already studied or the focus of a thematic unit covered in class. This is the most complex of readers theater activities and is also the most time-consuming. It can be assigned as a project after the reading of a major text or as a culminating activity at the end of a major thematic unit. In writing an original play, all processes of thinking and creativity are employed as students generate ideas, create settings, characters, and situations, stimulate their imaginations, and synthesize all these into a coherent whole in the final product.

Implementing Readers Theater

Careful planning for readers theater is necessary for the success of the activity. The following discusses steps that teachers can take to ensure that readers theater is successfully implemented in the classroom.

Prior to Writing

After deciding on the materials to use for recasting, the teacher guides the students, who usually work in small teams (group work) of three or four students, on the following points in the pre-writing stage:

- How will the original text be adapted? In this respect, please refer to the section on "Adapting Materials for Readers Theater." The teacher initially guides the students on the most appropriate form of adaptation and discusses actual examples that show the adaptations. When students are more experienced with readers theater, they can be given greater choice concerning the adaptations that would suit their purposes.
- What part/character does each member of a readers theater team take? Every member will take a part according to his/her interest, acting ability, and proficiency level. If there are more characters than members in a team, delete characters to suit the number in the team. Alternatively, a very proficient student may take two parts, or a member of another group may volunteer to take the extra character's part, in addition to the one he/she takes in his/her own group. The recommended strategy, however, is to add or delete characters according to the number in each team, and not to exceed four characters in each team to ensure effective management.
- Who will write the play? Decide on whether there will be one writer per team or whether each person writes his/her own lines for the character that he/she takes. (See Writing the Play)

- Will there be a narrator to provide background information, to describe setting and action? If there is no narrator, these aspects will need to be built in into the dialogue and more care needs to be taken to ensure that the information is conveyed to the audience during the performance.
- Are there characters who do not speak? If there are non-speaking parts, the students would need to devise ways to show the audience the role that these characters play in the scheme of things.
- Will the characters speak the way they do in the original material or will they adapt a different style of speaking? The characters' dialogue can be modified, for example, to give a more familiar and immediate effect.
- How will the characters be portrayed? Analyze and discuss the attributes of each character so that these attributes are clear in the writers' mind as they write. This is to ensure that characters are developed in a consistent way and that their portrayal is convincingly done.
- Which scenes, events, or episodes will be included? Evaluate these for importance and for the purpose of the writing. Discuss and decide whether specific details will enhance or detract from the effect of the play. Add, delete, and modify accordingly.

Writing the Play

Team work is the recommended strategy for writing and for presenting readers theater. Students work in small teams of three or four per team. Small numbers are recommended to ensure that everyone on the team is on task and putting in his/her very best for the success of the production. Team writing can be done in two ways:

1. The team assigns one writer and then the members help one another find dialogue that moves the plot along, bearing in mind portrayal of character and interpretation of

content. Each student is, in addition, ultimately responsible for the dialogue of the character he/she takes.

2. Each student writes his/her own lines. Team members discuss, and come to an agreement about adaptations, characterization, and the role that each one will take. Each student then writes dialogue where he/she fits in. The student skips lines where another character speaks and lets that student write his/her own dialogue. There is much reading and rereading of the text as the students move along to ensure that the dialogue is well-synthesized and coherent. Revising and editing is a continuous process – during the writing and again at the end when the whole play is completed.

Performing the Play

Performing before an audience is the culmination of the whole readers theater activity. The teacher, together with the students of each team, will decide on the mode of presentation. As the students become more adept, they can be given more freedom to choose how they want to present their play.

The simplest and most time-saving mode of presentation will be having team members sit or stand in various positions in the center or front of the classroom, reading from their scripts, with convincing expression and appropriate enunciation. Somewhat more complex is having team members read from their scripts, using appropriate gestures and movement, with simple props that are readily available in the classroom (e.g. a ruler to represent a microphone). These are the recommended methods for regular classroom presentation because they are effective, time-saving, and allow for several teams to perform during a class period.

Once in a while, if there is sufficient time for rehearsals and planning for a more elaborate production, some simple, real-life props and costumes can be used, with students reading or memorizing lines, using appropriate movement and gestures. The most elaborate is a full production. It can be attempted if students are

keen on it and if their scripts are of sufficient quality and complexity to allow for a full production.

Readers theater is usually performed in class, as soon as students have completed and revised their scripts. At times, classes can join together to present their plays so as to widen the audience base. Well-rehearsed plays with complex scripts can be presented to the whole school during assembly and to parents and an outside audience on speech days and during school concerts.

Evaluating Readers Theater

Both the students' scripts and the performance can be evaluated, although the teacher may choose to assign a mark only for the performance. Each member of a team is assigned the same mark, except in situations when it is apparent that certain members have done much more or much less work than the rest of the team.

.An effective strategy in evaluation is to pool whole class effort in evaluating each play. The teacher guides the students on crucial points to look out for in their evaluation. Depending on the focus and the adaptations of each readers theater session, an evaluation sheet with evaluation criteria is given to each student in the audience to fill in. The sheet can contain evaluation criteria for the following:

Recasting original text: Appropriate language use, convincing portrayal of characters, scenes appropriately developed, sustaining interest, overall impression.

Performance: Clear and effective reading of text, appropriate use of gestures and movements, appropriate use of props/costumes, overall impression.

Evaluation criteria may differ from one readers theater session to another. An example of one form of evaluation that is suitable for an original play is given in Appendix A. It is an evaluation sheet in which the evaluation criteria and the points assigned according to the degree of excellence are tabulated. Every student in the audience is given a sheet to fill in for each play. In using this evaluation sheet, the

teacher needs to first clarify what each criterion entails, as well as give examples that bear out the relative merits according to each criterion.

Conclusion

Readers theater, properly planned and carried out in the classroom, is a valuable instructional activity that fits well into an integrated language and literature program for several reasons. From the reading, through the writing, through the performance phases (not necessarily always in this order), readers theater integrates reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language study skills, thereby enabling the teacher to teach language and literature as a holistic entity. In literature studies and reading activities, it provides purposes for reading, one of which is to fully comprehend texts in order to recast them. In this way, readers theater enhances comprehension of texts and encourages deeper understanding of characters, themes, and authors' purposes. Students need to delve deeply into their texts to be able to recast, adapt, or modify them in an active reconstruction of the plot, the characters, and the setting.

In addition, the grammatical and vocabulary aspects of language learning are developed within context. Learners need to understand and appreciate various aspects of the language used in texts, the implications and suggestions behind particular words and phrases, and the turns of phrases. Unfamiliar words and phrases need to be examined for their meanings to enable coherent paraphrases or other adaptations of the original texts. Overall language awareness, and specifically that of vocabulary and grammar, is thus enhanced in the process.

Readers theater is a valuable instructional tool that promotes interactive, hands-on learning, i.e., learning by cooperating and by doing. The whole process of reading, writing, and performing in readers theater focuses on teamwork and collaborative learning. Planning, writing, and presentation are typically done in groups. Every member of the group participates and takes a part, writing his/her own lines and presenting them. Because each member has a specific role to play that makes for the success of the whole team, no

one can slacken with impunity. Writing a play or script is planned and executed for a readily available audience of fellow students who can provide immediate feedback and response. As the scripts are read orally or enacted, the audience responds to the quality of the writing and the meaning that is expressed through nuances of intonation and expressions. The interactive process, within writing teams and between writing teams, is thus continuously activated.

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APPENDIX A

READERS THEATER – EVALUATION CRITERIA

Name of Play _____

Evaluator's Name _____

Circle One

Points: 4 3 2 1

1. Plot

- | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------|------|---------|------|
| a. Clear profile | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |
| b. Sustains interest | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |
| c. Cause-effect relationships | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |
| d. Believable resolution | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |

2. Character Portrayal

- | | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------|------|---------|------|
| a. Believable | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |
| b. Clearly defined | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |
| c. Has depth | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |

3. Development of Scenes

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------|------|---------|------|
| a. Scenes adequately developed | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |
| b. Scenes linked with overall play | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |

4. Overall Impression Excellent Good Average Poor

COMMENTS _____
