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EMPOWERING ADULT ELLS' FLUENCY AND PRONUNCIATION SKILLS THROUGH READERS THEATER

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Readers Theater (RT) is a technique that has been used largely with elementary and middle school students (Corcoran, 2005; Keehn, Harmon, and Shoho, 2008) as a means of improving reading fluency. Few if any empirical studies have investigated the use of RT in building adult English language learners (ELLs) speaking fluency and accuracy. In this study, a series of RT scripts were developed and implemented with a group of low-intermediate level ESL learners. Pre and post-test quantitative and qualitative data were collected to determine the impact of RT on adult ELLs oral skills and self-confidence. A total of 12 ELLs ages 18 to 36 years old participated in an oral fluency class where a series of four different RT activities were implemented over the course of 14 weeks of instruction. Findings showed that RT activities not only enriched the L2 classroom experience, but learners were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of the technique in improving their general fluency, accuracy, and level of self-confidence in speaking English.

INTRODUCTION

Drama is an approach that has captured the attention of language teachers as a means to provide language learners with the opportunity to freely engage in interactive dialogue in a safe environment where they experience the language rather than merely learn about it. Drama can also provide students with the opportunity to practice real-life scenarios they may encounter helping a greater number of students become more confident and fluent in their communication (Burke and O'Sullivan, 2002, p. xix). Boudreault (2010) encourages the use of drama in language classes by stating, "ESL/EFL professionals need to use this medium more because the artificial world of the classroom can be transformed into a quasi-real language situation and provides an endless amount of opportunities for students' personal growth" (para. 1).

While there are many types of dramatic techniques that have been used in language classrooms such as skits, full-length plays, improvisation, etc., there is one particular technique that has the potential to capture learners' attention and develop measures of oral fluency while not requiring learners to move about a stage, use costumes, extensive props, or actions (Moran, 2006). This technique is Readers Theater (RT).

Background Information

Readers Theater (RT) was initially developed to help children develop their oral reading skills (Corcoran, 2005), including reading fluency (Millin and Rinehart, 1999). In RT, students take on the persona of a character in the script. They use facial expressions, hand gestures, and speak with great emotion to demonstrate their character's personality. Typically, these scripts have been based on fairy tales or folklore (Ng, 2008). While these types of texts can be fun and

interactive, Ng and Boucher-Yip (2010) argue that they can also be used to help readers strive for voice flexibility, good articulation, proper pronunciation, and projection. Research done by Young and Rasinski (2009) with monolingual elementary school students found that RT helped learners build their ability to make meaning in English as well as reading fluency and confidence. Further, they found that unmotivated students became motivated and struggling readers thrived (p. 11).

English language teachers have also used RT in developing English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) students' speaking fluency and accuracy (Liu, 2000; Tsou, 2011). Wu (2015) reported that RT had a profound influence in students' learning and retention of English idioms. Ng (2008) commented that RT scripts provide a rich source of comprehensible input in language that is natural and spoken. Evie Tindall (2012), describes RT as a "time-tested [approach]... [providing] English language learners with content tailored to their abilities in addition to [innumerable] opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions with language, content, and teachers and peers" (p. 36).

Even with the positive influences that research into RT has demonstrated, unfortunately, the majority of available scripts have been created for young learners and are based on stories largely appropriate for learners in grades K-6 (Garrett and O'Connor, 2010). The content of the scripts seldom relate to the themes, vocabulary, and textbook content that adult ESL learners are experiencing in their ESL classes. Besides the challenge of finding appropriate scripts for adult learners, teachers often avoid using dramatic techniques such as RT for several reasons: 1) because they lack training in drama or how to implement role play in the classroom, 2) because they fear they will not be able to find teacher-friendly material that explains how to put on a play or that provides actual scripts appropriate for classroom use, 3) that using dramatic techniques turns too much control over to the students and the class may get out of control (Burke and O'Sullivan, 2002, p. xxii) and finally, 4) because teachers often admit they lack training in how to organize instruction that will assist learners with developing elements of pronunciation and articulation in English (Foote, et al., 2011).

The focus of the current study was to use RT to help promote oral skills development in adult ESL learners enrolled in an intensive English program. A total of four RT scripts were created that aligned with the course content. Pre and post surveys were completed at the beginning and end of a 14-week semester allowing students to evaluate how the use of RT influenced their oral fluency, accuracy, and level of self-confidence. Each script was introduced and practiced for a period of three weeks after which the students' performance was videotaped and students viewed the tape for personal reflection and development, and each student received personal feedback from the teacher. The program's Speaking Level Achievement Test (LAT) was comprised of a series of 12 leveled speaking tasks. The test was administered at the beginning and end of the semester to both the treatment and control groups of students in an effort to determine whether the RT treatment enhanced the participants' overall speaking proficiency. An end-of-semester survey and focus groups were conducted in an effort to collect qualitative feedback from the treatment group about their experience with RT.

Research Questions

In an effort to empirically evaluate the influence of RT on the oral skills and self-confidence of intermediate-level ESL learners, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How did the ESL learners evaluate the impact of RT on their perceived levels of fluency, accuracy, and self-confidence?
2. What qualitative feedback did learners provide regarding the embedding of RT into the course curriculum?
3. Did the end of semester level achievement tests (LATs) show a difference in speaking skills between the control and treatment groups?

METHODS

To examine the influence that RT had on the ESL learners in a 14-week intensive English program, a quasi-experimental study was constructed. Participants in the control group did not receive any instruction involving RT. In the treatment group, however, learners participated in a 14-week instructional period, where every three weeks, students would practice a scripted dialogue involving multiple speakers. At the end of the three weeks of practice, the presentation was videotaped for the purpose of self-evaluation and teacher evaluation of the students' performance.

Participants

Subjects in the study were all studying English as a second language in a large intensive English program connected to a private university in the Western United States. At the beginning of the semester, students who scored at the intermediate level on the program's placement test were randomly placed into one of three Foundations C (intermediate-med) classes. Two classes (a total of 26 ELLs) were designated as the control group where they completed the normal curriculum. The third class (12 participants) was designated as the treatment group. They received 14 weeks of RT instruction in addition to the normal curriculum. A total of 61.5% of the ESL learners had spent one year or less studying English. The other students (38.5%) had studied English for more than a year. The age range for all of the participants was from 18 to 34 years old. For students in the treatment group, 84.6% of the students had Spanish as their first language (L1), and 7.7% of the students were Portuguese speakers and 7.7% were Chinese speakers.

Surveys

Treatment group participants completed pre and post surveys during the semester. The initial survey captured demographic data from the participants including their age, first language, gender, and length of time they had studied English. Near the end of the semester, students in the treatment group were asked to participate in a focus group. This focus group was facilitated by an experienced teacher who did not teach at the English language program. Students in the treatment group also signed consent forms at the beginning of the semester consistent with regulations put in place by the university's Institutional Review Board, that safeguarded students' identity and all data generated from the study.

Script Creation

Because a major purpose of this study was to empirically evaluate the use of RT embedded into an intermediate-level intensive English course, the RT scripts were created from topics and themes identified in the course textbook. The topics included: academic honesty, finding a job,

ways of travel, and modern innovations. There were a few guidelines that researchers used in creating the scripts. These guidelines included:

- The topic should be authentic and relevant to the learners' situation
- The script needed to include idiomatic expressions and key vocabulary from the unit lessons
- The scripted dialog needed to include a conversation between four to five different characters of different genders, personality types, and ages
- The scripted dialog was to contain a conflict or problem that speakers in the conversation would seek to resolve in the course of the dialog
- The dialog needed to include language that was emotive, requiring the use of facial expressions, hand gestures, and inflections in the voice
- The script length should allow for a minimum of six to eight speaking turns per character which meant that the dialogs were 35 to 40 lines long

Once the scripts were created, each was piloted with a small group of native English speakers to ensure a natural flow in the language, the use of a variety of emotions, and appropriate phrasing and wording consistent with how people would engage in authentic dialog. After appropriate adjustments were made, the group of native speakers then rehearsed the dialog so that they could perform it naturally including times when speakers might be speaking at the same time as another person which often happens in real speech. After several minutes of rehearsing, the dialog was then recorded for use by the teacher and ESL learners inside and outside the classroom. This same process was used in recording each of the four scripted dialogs.

Implementation of the Scripts

It is important to note that during the first week of the course and prior to the implementation of the first script, the teacher reviewed and practiced with students several basic features of effective pronunciation. These features included the importance of clear articulation, the purpose of pausing when producing chunked expressions, the role that word and sentence stress have in emphasizing important syllables and words in a sentence, and the use of rising and falling pitch when a speaker produces different types of utterances such as yes/no questions, wh-questions, statements, and expressions that contain a high degree of emotion. Once students were aware of the importance and use of prosodic features, the teacher could utilize this knowledge in implementing the scripts.

The cycle that was followed by the teacher in implementing each of the four scripts into the class is given in Figure 1.

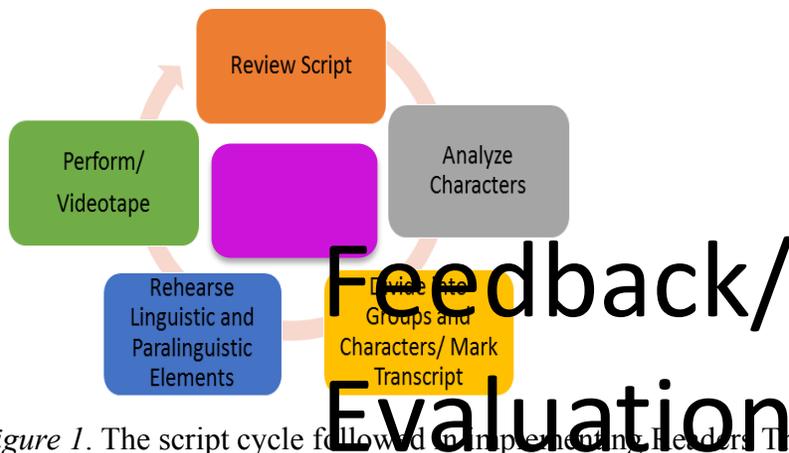


Figure 1. The script cycle followed in implementing Readers Theater into the class.

Each cycle lasted a total of three weeks and provided the students the opportunity to move through several steps including: 1) reviewing the script for new vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and grammar; 2) analyzing the characters including their attitudes and emotions; 3) marking the script for prosodic features such as pausing, word and sentence stress, and intonation contours; 4) practicing the dialog both in class and at home with the markings and the native English speaker recording to develop a smooth flow in the delivery of each line; and 5) having the final performance videotaped for self-assessment and teacher evaluation.

As students practiced the script, the teacher provided regular feedback throughout the process by assisting with prosodic accuracy, the use of timing and turn-taking, facial expressions and hand gestures, and incorporating sufficient volume, energy, and emotion in the discourse.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Participants in the treatment group were asked in the pre and post surveys, to identify on a 5-point Likert scale their perceived levels of fluency, accuracy, and self-confidence at that respective point in time. The feedback provided showed that in all three areas, fluency, accuracy, and self-confidence, students felt they improved dramatically over the course of 14 weeks (See Figures 2, 3, and 4).

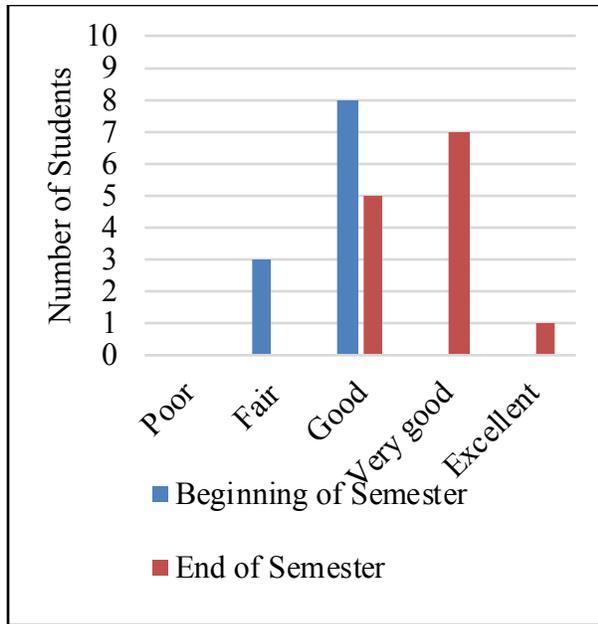


Figure 2. Change in ESL students' perceived level of fluency (pre & post)

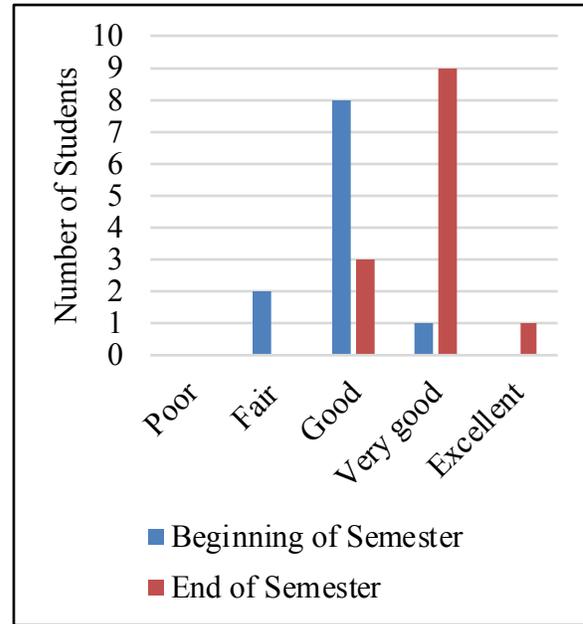


Figure 3. Change in ESL students' perceived level of accuracy (pre & post)

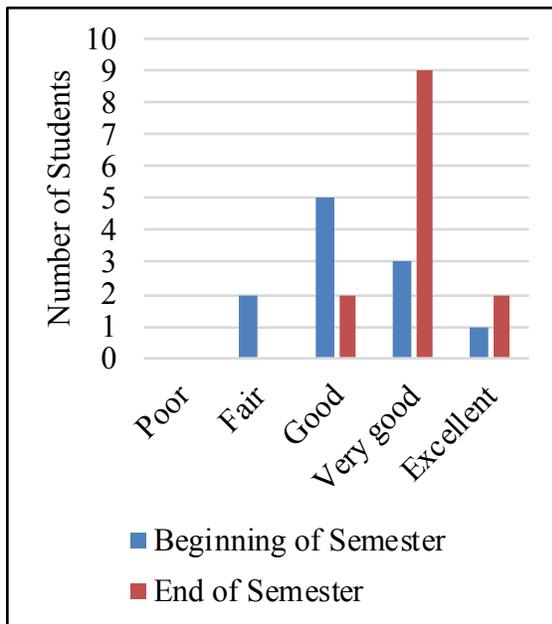


Figure 4. Change in ESL students' perceived level of self-confidence (pre & post)

The students were also asked to evaluate specifically how RT helped improve their speaking, listening, and pronunciation skills on a scale from 0 to 10, with zero being “not at all” and 10 being “extremely improved.” When calculating the mean score for all students, the influence of RT on speaking skills was 9.5, listening was rated at 6.25, and pronunciation was at a level 10. Finally, the level achievement test scores (LATs) of students in the control and treatment groups were compared from the beginning of the semester to their test scores at the end of the semester.

In the pre-test, the average scores for the control and treatment groups only differed by a measure of 0.02. The control group's performance was at 3.26 on a proficiency scale ranging from 0 to 7. The treatment group's score was at 3.24. At the end of the semester, both groups improved significantly over time as determined by an analysis of variance (ANOVA) ($F(1,37) = 12.644, p = .001$). The partial eta squared = .26 (from the pre-test to the post-test) showed a large effect size.) However, when comparing the between group scores from the pre-test to the post-test, there was no significant difference between the groups ($F(1,37) = 1.365, p = .250$, partial eta squared = .037).

Qualitative Findings – Focus Groups

In addition to the Likert scale data from the pre- and post surveys, two focus groups were held outside of class time in which a total of 11 students from the treatment group participated. In probing the participants more specifically regarding the use of RT in the classroom, they stated on a scale from 0 to 10 with 10 meaning the activity was extremely beneficial to their English development, RT was rated at a value of 8.5. With regards to the value of RT in the intensive ESL classroom, all focus group participants stated that they felt the activity was fun and the teacher helped make it so. The participants also commented that RT provided focused practice on pronunciation, fluency, stress, pausing, and intonation. They also appreciated learning the idiomatic expressions that were built into the conversations. Participants stated that they felt the technique had helped build their self-confidence in speaking English and they enjoyed listening to and watching their videotaped conversations on YouTube.

The focus group participants also provided some helpful recommendations for future application of RT in the ESL classroom. Recommendations included: 1) Practicing additional scripts dealing with situations occurring in every day contexts like communicating at the bank, talking with doctors and nurses at the hospital, or shopping; 2) Making the scripts longer with additional turns; 3) Progressively shortening the time it took to prepare the scripts from three weeks to two weeks or even one week; 4) Memorizing the final script and performing it for another class. In this way, students suggested that the final performance would be more of a real performance since it would be for others and not just classmates.

DISCUSSION

As previous research (Jordan and Harrell, 2000; Ng, 2008; Liu 2000) has shown, RT can be a fun, interactive activity that involves ESL learners in oral discourse practice both inside and outside the classroom. It provided learners with the opportunity to be engaged in focused practice on the use of prosodic features in developing oral fluency and accuracy through the conversations rehearsed in the RT scripts. Learners also reported that the RT activities developed their self-confidence in speaking English, and facilitated their connection of linguistic and paralinguistic features through the scripted dialogs. The videotaped performance further provided students and teacher a means of evaluating individual student performance in the areas of speech rate, emotive language, appropriate phrase and sentence stress, intonation, and chunking of language through the appropriate use of pausing and thought groups.

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Even though there was a small number of students involved in the treatment group and the treatment only lasted for 10-15 minutes a day over the course of 14 weeks, participants did report dramatic improvement in areas of oral fluency, accuracy, and self-confidence due to the use of RT in the classroom. To better determine the actual influence of RT on ESL students' linguistic change in English, it may be necessary to design specific read aloud tasks in the LATs in addition to the spontaneous speech tasks to accurately measure specific changes in students' fluency and accuracy. These tasks could be designed so that students' speech rate, articulation rate, pause frequency, stress placement, and use of T-units could be measured. Currently, the LATs are rated holistically using a speaking rubric developed in-house for student placement. A pronunciation rubric (Ma, et al., 2018) could be used as well to better assess learners' pronunciation development as it may be impacted more directly through the RT tasks.

The positive results from this study suggest that additional inquiry into the use of RT with adult ESL learners needs to be further explored. The positive reactions of learners to this technique suggests that at a minimum, the activity provides a fun, interactive, and yet challenging means for learners to improve linguistic and paralinguistic features present in conversational discourse, something that all students need to be able to perform as competent speakers of a second language.

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