

# Bringing English to Life: Motivating Young EFL Learners with Readers Theater\*

Deborah Farley, Office of English Language Programs, U.S. Embassy, Mexico City

## Abstract

The article describes a classroom technique called Readers Theater. It is a literature-based activity that incorporates reading, listening and speaking in a way that is motivating and builds student confidence. The author explains to how organize a Readers Theater activity and gives examples for how the technique works.

El artículo describe una técnica para el salón de clase llamado "Reader's Theater" (Teatro del Lector). La actividad se basa en la literatura, y combina las habilidades de lectura, comprensión auditiva, y producción oral de una manera que le da al alumno motivación y confianza. La autora explica cómo organizar una actividad de "Reader's Theater" y da ejemplos de cómo funciona esta técnica.

## Introduction

Imagine a classroom strategy that incorporates speaking, listening, and reading, builds student confidence, is easy for teachers to use, and can be applied to literature as well as nonfiction and content-based texts. It may sound like the impossible dream, but the answer lies in Readers Theater!

## What Is Readers Theater?

Readers Theater is a communicative classroom strategy that incorporates stories and other texts with oral reading and drama (Shepard, 2004; Worthy and Prater, 2002). In Readers Theater, students read a script out loud, using their voices, facial expression, and gestures to convey the story's meaning and mood. They do not memorize their lines. While it was designed originally for native speakers of English, it has proved to be a powerful motivator for my English Language Learner students. I have seen it boost student enthusiasm and confidence in using English. If students can read, they can participate in Readers Theater!

Readers Theater scripts include parts for characters and narrators. The narrators play a big part in telling the story, providing the necessary background information about the setting and action of the story. The number of parts in an individual script can be varied by adding additional narrators or adding or deleting characters.

Presentations can take the form of students reading the script in an informal setting, e.g. in front of their peers in the classroom, or as a more formal production presented for parents or other classes. Some teachers include work with Readers Theater as part of their ongoing literacy instruction. It can be a "regular instruc-

---

\* This is a refereed article.

tional activity rather than limited to special occasions" (Worthy and Prater, 2002).

There are many scripts available online and in books, but I have found that young learners greatly benefit from Readers Theater scripts based on stories they already know or information they are familiar with. The use of such texts and content provides important background knowledge that helps to support students' understanding of the vocabulary and script. For example, if students already know the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", they will be able to more easily "hook" onto a Readers Theater script of the story. Or, if they are studying the rainforest in class, they will already have the schema of rainforest vocabulary and content to apply to a Readers Theater script based on that topic.

### **Why use Readers Theater in the English Language Teaching classroom?**

Research has shown that repeated reading of a text can improve oral reading fluency, increase sight vocabulary, and aid in reading comprehension (Rasinski, 2003; Worthy and Prater, 2002; National Reading Panel, 2000). However, teachers know how difficult it can be to motivate our students to reread the same text over and over and over again. Rereading is inherent in Readers Theater as students rehearse their parts and refine their skills in oral expression.

Readers Theater "not only combines several effective research-based practices, but also leads to increased engagement with literacy" (Worthy and Prater, 2002). Some of these effective practices, as defined by the National Reading Panel Report (2000), include guided repeated oral reading, teacher modeling of fluent reading, and the use of predictable text. Predictable text is repeated language such as that found in nursery rhymes and some children's literature. For example, predictable text in the story "The Three Little Pigs" includes:

*"Little pig, little pig, let me come in!"*

*"Not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin!"*

*"Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in!"*

For other examples of predictable text, see "Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear" and "Little Red Riding Hood" below.

Readers Theater offers an authentic opportunity for students to use English in the EFL classroom. Students cooperate, collaborate, and communicate with each other as they assign the different roles, practice and improve their reading, interpret their lines, and provide feedback to each other. In addition, it allows students of all proficiency levels to participate. In a mixed-proficiency class, beginning students can read words or simple phrases, lines that are repeated, or be part of a group or chorus. Higher-level proficiency students can help to support their peers by partner-reading or even help to write scripts. Using a text previously used in class or creating a script from their own writing allows higher-level proficiency students to understand such features of writing as summarizing, editing, and revising as well as the elements of a story such as characters, setting, plot, and conclusion. The creation of their own scripts also provides opportunities for students to exercise their critical thinking skills as they delve deeper into the story, analyze the characters and the theme, and synthesize the information.

Development of oral proficiency is another benefit of using Readers Theater. While rehearsing and performing their parts, students perfect their oral expression, pronunciation, and inflection. Students use intonation, facial expression, and gestures in order to express their character's emotions and actions rather than acting out the script in a traditional way.

Teachers are able to address their students' varied learning styles and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) through Readers Theater. For example, Verbal-Linguistic Intelligence is addressed as students read, write, and engage in storytelling. Interpersonal Intelligence is acknowledged through student collaboration and cooperation and Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence through performance and the use of gestures and facial expression. Teachers may wish to give students with Visual-Spatial Intelligence the opportunity to create costumes, masks, props, or staging.

### **Lowering the affective filter**

It is not uncommon for students learning a new language to feel shy or anxious when confronted with the task of actually using the L2 (Young, D.J. 1991; Scovel, 1978). Readers Theater helps to lower the "affective filter" (Krashen, 1983) in the classroom in several ways. First, repeated reading of a text builds student confidence. "Rehearsals" make reading purposeful, meaningful, and enjoyable. With each reading, students gain a deeper understanding of the text and improve their comprehension and fluency.

In addition, since they hold their scripts while reading their parts and do not have to memorize their lines, students feel more secure and less anxious about making errors. Working in small groups encourages cooperation and collaboration between students as they practice and refine their parts.

Brain-based learning principles point to the powerful role that emotions play in learning, including the positive effects of the use of novelty (something new and different), humor, and fun to lower anxiety in the class (Sousa, 2006). A positive classroom environment includes activities that help students get emotionally connected to classroom content while lowering their anxiety level. Lowering student anxiety is crucial in several ways. When students feel stressed, blood flows away from those parts of the brain responsible for thinking and analysis and towards those parts responsible strictly for survival. A classroom that is high in challenge and low in perceived threat (Caine, R., Caine, G., McClintic & Klimek, 2009) also helps to release endorphins in the brain which stimulates the frontal lobes and fosters higher-order, critical thinking. In addition, the use of movement is not only fun for students, but can increase the flow of blood to the brain by 15% (Sousa, 2006).

### **The beauty of Readers Theater for teachers**

Including Readers Theater in the EFL classroom is relatively easy for teachers to do. As compared to putting on a play, Readers Theater does not require costumes, props, or a stage. With a computer and a short text or story, Readers Theater scripts can be easily created by teachers.

While costumes are optional in Readers Theater, I have found that young learners often enjoy wearing something that represents their character. This can be

as simple as hanging a sign with the name or picture of their character around their neck (for example, a picture of a duck for the Ugly Duckling), wearing a headband with paper ears attached for an animal, or wearing a crown for a king. Masks are another creative option; students can also make the mask as part of the lesson. Any props or stage sets used can also be very simple.

There are many Readers Theater scripts available online for free. There are also many scripts available in books. However, scripts can be easily adapted by teachers from a wide variety of stories and other texts, including poetry and non-fiction. Texts that can be effectively used for young learners include books and stories with predictable text as well as fairy tales, fables, and folk tales. The use of fairy tales and folk tales that students are already familiar with taps into their background knowledge, which further supports their understanding of the text. Stories that are somewhat short, with a simple structure that has a clear beginning, middle, and end, are a good choice.

**How to create a Readers Theater script from a text**

Teachers can easily create a Readers Theater script by following these steps:

1. Choose a story or short section of a book. Text that includes dialog can be especially suitable for Readers Theater scripts.
2. Circle the characters in the story.
3. Underline or highlight the dialog.
4. The text that remains is the narration. You can choose to give these lines to the narrator(s) or to the character that they apply to.

As mentioned before, a script can have one or more narrators depending on the number of students presenting the script. Extra characters can also be added, if necessary.

The following are some examples of scripts using stories with predictable text and content-based student writing. The first is from the traditional children’s rhyme “Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear”. The second is a part of a script based on “Little Red Riding Hood”. The final script was created from a portion of a compare/contrast student essay about elephants.

**Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear (Author: Unknown)**

A Readers Theater example for younger children. In this example, the students are divided into 8 groups.

Original Text	Readers Theater Script
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Turn around.	Whole Class: Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Group 1: Turn around.
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Touch the ground.	Whole Class: Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Group 2: Touch the ground.
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Touch your nose.	Whole Class: Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Group 3: Touch your nose.
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Touch your toes.	Whole Class: Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Group 4: Touch your toes.

Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Climb the stairs.	Whole Class: Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Group 5: Climb the stairs.
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Say your prayers.	Whole Class: Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Group 6: Say your prayers.
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Turn out the light.	Whole Class: Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Group 7: Turn out the light.
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Say goodnight.	Whole Class: Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Group 8: Say goodnight!

### Little Red Riding Hood (by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm)

The following is a portion of a Readers Theater script based on "Little Red Riding Hood":

Original Text	Readers Theater Script
Little Red Riding Hood walked into Grandmother's room. She saw her Grandmother in the bed.	Narrator: Little Red Riding Hood walked into Grandmother's room. She saw her Grandmother in the bed.
Little Red Riding Hood cried: "Grandmother, what big eyes you have!"	Little Red Riding Hood: Grandmother, what big eyes you have!
"The better to see you with, my dear!" replied the wolf.	Wolf: The better to see you with, my dear!
Then Little Red Riding Hood said, "Grandmother, what big ears you have!"	Little Red Riding Hood: Grandmother, what big ears you have!
The wolf said, "The better to hear you with, my dear!"	Wolf: The better to hear you with, my dear!
Then she said, "Grandmother, what a big nose you have!"	Little Red Riding Hood: Grandmother, what a big nose you have!
The wolf answered, "The better to smell you with, my dear!"	Wolf: The better to smell you with, my dear!
Then Little Red Riding Hood cried, "Grandmother, what big teeth you have!"	Little Red Riding Hood: Grandmother, what big teeth you have!
The wolf growled, "The better to eat you with, my dear! GRRRRR!!!!"	Wolf: The better to eat you with, my dear! GRRRRR!!!!
Little Red Riding Hood ran out the door. She yelled for help.	Narrator: Little Red Riding Hood ran out the door.
	Little Red Riding Hood: Help, help!!!

While traditional Readers Theater scripts are based on literature, non-fiction, content-area texts, and student writing can also be used. In these cases, the text can be easily adapted into a script by assigning short passages of the text to individual readers or groups of students. Dialog can also be created as desired. The following script is based on a student writing sample about elephants:

### Elephants A Content-based Readers Theater Script

Original Text	Readers Theater Script
<p>The Asian elephant and the African elephant are the same and different in several ways. First, they are the same because they are both huge mammals. The African elephant is the largest living land animal. They are also the same because they live in family groups and the female leads the group.</p>	<p>Reader 1: The Asian elephant and the African elephant are the same and different in several ways.</p>
<p>Female and male African elephants both have tusks, but only the male Asian elephant has tusks. The ears of both kinds of elephants help keep them cool. They are different because the African elephant's ears are bigger than the Asian elephant's ears and they are shaped like Africa!</p>	<p>Reader 2: First, they are the same because they are both huge mammals.</p>
	<p>African Elephant: I'm an African elephant and I'm the largest living land animal!</p>
	<p>Reader 3: They are also the same because they live in family groups.</p>
	<p>Asian Elephant: I'm a <u>female</u> elephant and I lead the family group!</p>
	<p>Reader 4: Elephants have tusks.</p>
	<p>African Elephant: Both female and male African elephants have tusks.</p>
	<p>Asian Elephant: But only <u>male</u> Asian elephants do!</p>
	<p>Reader 5: The ears of both kinds of elephants help keep them cool.</p>
	<p>African Elephant: But African elephants' ears are bigger than the Asian elephant's and they are shaped like Africa!</p>

### How do we prepare students to do Readers Theater?

Readers Theater brings a story to life not only for the audience, but for the readers as well. While first introducing the script to the students, the teacher should demonstrate fluent reading. It can be useful for students if the teacher models non-expressive versus expressive reading; e.g. first, reading lines from the script in a monotone and then, reading with expression, using intonation, facial expression, and gestures. The teacher can underline or italicize words that should be stressed and add commas or exclamation marks to help students remember where to add expression. Sound effects can also be included to add expression and humor to the script.

If the script is based on a story, the teacher should read the story to the students ahead of time. This provides important background knowledge for the students which will aid in their comprehension of the story. It is also important to pre-teach any unknown vocabulary or concepts in the script.

Each student should be given a script with their part highlighted. This makes it easier for students to follow along and read their part at the correct time. Following the first modeled reading by the teacher, students often benefit from reading the script aloud as a whole group with the teacher, either choral-reading in unison or echo-reading (reading each phrase after the teacher reads). They may

then read with a partner or in small groups. You can choose to have students take turns reading all of the parts or just their own part.

Usually, students simply stand or sit in chairs in front of the class with the narrators on the right and left sides. Students do not need to move from their place in line; however, it is often irresistible for them to move during the actual performance in order to more fully express their character's lines. It is entirely up to each teacher to decide which model to use.

### Conclusion & Resources

The use of Readers Theater in the EFL classroom scaffolds opportunities for students to use English in an authentic, motivating, and non-threatening context. It helps to promote oral expression and can increase reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Research-proven strategies (National Reading Panel, 2000) such as teacher modeling of fluent reading, the use of predictable text, and guided repeated reading are inherent in Readers Theater. In addition, it can be adapted for many language proficiency levels and incorporate stories, poems, and traditional children's rhymes as well as non-fiction text.

Teachers who are seeking an instructional strategy that can build their students' confidence in using English and boost their students' interest in reading should look no further than Readers Theater. Give it a try and let the fun begin!

The following are some great websites that offer scripts, tips, and ideas for assessment for Readers Theater:

**Reader's Theater Editions:** <http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/RTE.html>

**Literacy Connections: Reader's Theater:** <http://literacyconnections.com/ReadersTheater.php>

**The Reading Lady: (click on "Readers Theater" on menu at the left)** <http://www.readinglady.com/>

**Teaching Heart: Reader's Theater Scripts and Plays:**  
<http://www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm>

**Whootie Owl:** <http://www.storiestogrowby.com/script.html>

### References

- Caine, R., Caine, G., McClintic C., & Klimek, K. (2009). *12 Brain/Mind Learning Principles in Action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Krashen, S. (1983). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. London: Prentice Hall International.
- National Reading Panel 2000. Teaching children to read. Retrieved April 29, 2009 from [www.nationalreadingpanel.org](http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org)
- Rasinski, T. (2003, April). Guided fluency instruction. *Scholastic*. Retrieved May 3, 2009 from <http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/fluencyformula/pdfs/Instruction.pdf>
- Scovel, T. (1978). The effect of affect: A review of the anxiety literature. *Language Learning*, 28, 129-142.
- Shepard, A. (n.d.) *Aaron Shepard's RT Page*. Retrieved May 8, 2009 from [www.aaronshp.com/rt](http://www.aaronshp.com/rt)
- Sousa, D. (2006). *How the Brain Learns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Worthy, J. and Prater, K. (2002). "I thought about it all night": Readers theatre for reading fluency and motivation. *The Reading Teacher*, 56 (3), 294-297.

Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*. 75, 426-439.

### **About the Author**

Deborah Farley is the Senior English Language Fellow working with the Office of English Language Programs at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. She has worked as a teacher-trainer of EFL teachers in Mexico and Chile and taught EFL in Prague, Czech Republic. She has taught and coordinated U.S. elementary and middle school English Language Learner programs since 1994. Deborah has a Master's Degree in TESOL from St. Michael's College, Vermont.