



READERS' THEATRE IN THE CLASSROOM

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 Readers' Theatre in the Classroom

Vignette


Early on, a small group of children from a nearby *basti* started attending my weekend library sessions quite regularly. These children were from grades 2 through 6 at a small NGO-run school.

Unfortunately, the school wasn't teaching literacy effectively: except for the two oldest girls who had only recently joined the school, none of the children could read well. They displayed different degrees of struggle with reading (in Hindi), most of them putting together letter-sounds haltingly to form words.

I knew I couldn't teach reading in the limited time I had with them, but felt compelled to do something about this. This got me thinking—with what engaging and purposeful activity could I encourage my students to practise reading and improve fluency?

I decided to try Readers' Theatre—a play where performance involves reading out one's lines from a script fluently and with expression. So I wrote a script based on *Geet ka Kamal*¹, and shared the idea with the children. They loved the idea!

The goal of performing for an audience (one small group would perform for another) created tremendous enthusiasm. The children got fully involved in practising reading their lines. They would sit in corners, alone or in pairs, and practise. The younger ones worked

with me before attempting to read independently.

Over two or three sessions, they practised and rehearsed, never once becoming restless or bored. They even made several suggestions about the dialogues and performance. When the group felt ready, they performed the play.



When I planned this activity, I hadn't anticipated how popular and effective it would be. Not only did the children read and re-read the text for fluency and expression without losing enthusiasm, but they also engaged in conversations around the book or story the script was based on. Quite organically, the feedback around appropriate tone and expressions sparked interesting discussions around characters' motivation, personality and context. Of course, no single activity can remedy all literacy concerns, but readers' theatre will remain an important part of my language and literacy toolkit.

— *Facilitator at a community library for children*

In readers' theatre, students rehearse and perform a play for an audience. But as the vignette mentions, these are not regular plays: students don't *memorise* lines, or act out parts in the conventional sense. You don't need props, scenes or costumes. Instead, students read out from a script adapted from a book (see Figure 1).

The only requirement is this—to bring the text alive for the audience through fluent and expressive reading, students have to practise reading their parts several times before performing.

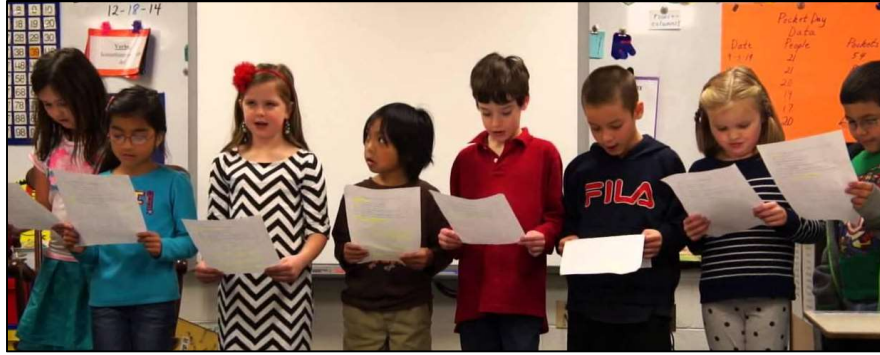


Figure 1. A readers' theatre session in progress¹

What Does Readers' Theatre Help With?

In the vignette, the teacher used readers' theatre mainly to improve children's reading fluency. Fluency is not simply reading fast. It is the ability to read correctly, with appropriate pace and expression that reflects the meaning of the text. The best way to build reading fluency is to read the same texts several times. However, children may not feel motivated to do this. In readers' theatre, performing for an audience gives students a powerful reason to reread texts and practise fluency (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Moreover, because scripts are typically adapted from students' favourite books, they find the process all the more exciting.

Besides improved fluency, readers' theatre can benefit students in several other important ways too! In preparing for the performance, students think about the story, its context, how the plot unfolds, and so on. As the vignette indicated, discussions around roles can help students understand literary elements, such as motivation and characterisation. Thus, students engage deeply with the text with an increased emphasis on meaning. All these can significantly contribute to their comprehension of the text.

Readers' theatre can also integrate students' listening-speaking-reading-writing² skills, an important literacy goal in the early years (Cornwell, 2019). We will get to the writing part later,

¹ Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BIVO8uyLIQ

² Refer to ELI Practitioner Brief *Teaching Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing: Sequential or Simultaneous?* for more on this.

but you can see how readers' theatre brings together the other three skills in a meaningful manner.

Perhaps, most importantly, readers' theatre gives students a real purpose for reading and an authentic context in which to think about their response to the literature they have read or listened to. Readers' theatre, thus, is an important tool for language and literacy learning. In this handout, we list key steps and suggestions for using readers' theatre in the classroom.

Using Readers' Theatre in the Classroom

1. Select appropriate literature. Readers' theatre can be planned with many kinds of literature: picture books, short stories, chapter books, folktales, non-fiction, and so on. From the books your students like, select one with interesting content or compelling, well-paced storyline that has many characters and a lot of dialogue (or the content should allow for dialogues to be written). You don't have to use the entire book—you can select interesting portions and exchanges. In the vignette, the teacher chose *Geet ka Kamal* because her students had tremendously enjoyed it when it was read aloud to them. It is a humorous folktale, has interesting characters and witty dialogues with some repetitive sing-song patterns as well.

In selecting books for readers' theatre, consider texts that roughly match the reading level of your students—with practice, they should be able to read it aloud well.

2. Write a script based on the book. For fluency, a useful rule of thumb is to give children texts they can read with around 90% accuracy. So if you think that the selected text is slightly difficult for your group, simplify and adapt it such that it challenges your students, but is within their reach with practice.

In writing the script, you can divide the story or excerpted portions into scenes. In addition to characters, include a *narrator* who provides the necessary background information and description in the play. If you're adapting text to dialogue, make it sound natural and interesting, adding some drama or humour. Let the script not be very long for young students.

You can find many readers' theatre scripts in English online³. But you can create scripts of your own using the books popular with your group.

Involving Students in Writing Scripts

Once students become familiar with reader's theatre, you can involve them in creating scripts. Use simple picture books in the beginning to create scripts together as a class¹ before you ask students to create their own scripts in small, cooperative groups (Cornwell, 2019). As you model creating scripts, demonstrate the aspects of "how-to" clearly. For example, how to identify critical portions that must be included in the script to do justice to the story; how to adapt passages to dialogues, what kinds of information and transitions should the narrator offer for the audience, and how to simplify words or phrases in the book.

Children writing scripts is not necessary but can be very useful. It is a wonderful opportunity to integrate writing with listening, speaking and reading. This can also be an interesting way of encouraging students' response to literature. Besides, students enjoy creating dialogues for the characters they're familiar with!

3. Make photocopies of the script for your students. Ideally, each child gets an individual copy.
4. In your first session, explain what happens in a readers' theatre. Tell them who the audience will be, so there is a sense of purpose to the preparation. The audience could be their classmates, teachers, parents and community members. Or, they could perform the play during the morning assembly. Emphasise that they needn't memorise lines but should practise their parts well so they read fluently and expressively for the audience to follow the play.

³ Some websites that publish links to readers' theatre scripts (in English) from different websites:

<http://www.thebestclass.org/rtscripts.html>

<http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/RTE.html>

<http://www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm>

5. Assign reading parts to each child in the group, keeping their reading ability in mind. Assign meaty roles—requiring a lot of reading—to the more proficient readers. For example, in the vignette, the teacher assigned the text-heavy narrator roles in *Geet ka Kamal* to the two older girls who could read well.
6. Model fluent and expressive reading. To familiarise students with the script, first read it aloud a couple of times demonstrating effective reading as students follow in their copies silently (see Figure 2).

This modelling should not be restricted to the introductory phase. Once students have had a chance to get acquainted with the text and as they practice reading their parts, give them feedback and model what they could do to improve.



Figure 2. Teacher modelling reading of different parts in the script, as students follow.
Picture Courtesy: Akhila Pydah

7. Ask students to practise reading their parts. If it helps, they can highlight or underline their parts. Let them practice a couple of times in pairs or small groups before the whole group rehearses together. If done sensitively, more proficient readers could help their peers in these small groups. Continue modelling effective reading through this preparatory phase. Support students in decoding difficult words, and slowly encourage them to add expression, pace, phrasing as well as appropriate rise and fall in their voice by drawing attention to the meaning of the text, the situation in the story and the character they are playing. Make space for students to share and discuss their suggestions and interpretations.

Working with students on how expression and intonation affect meaning can be fun. For example, ask them to say the dialogue “He made the cake” with emphasis on a different word each time and think about the meaning it conveys: “**He** made the cake” versus “He **made** the cake” or “He made the **cake**”. Similarly, you could help students explore how punctuation affects tone and meaning (e.g. *He made the cake.* versus *He made the cake!* versus *He made the cake?*).

Provide extra individual practice to those who need it. You can have multiple practice sessions if your students want them. Encourage them to practice at home as well.

8. When students are ready, when they are reading comfortably and fluently, invite them to perform in front of the class or the intended audience. For the performance, children could make labels with their character names or pictures (see Figure 3). Using these helps the spectators to follow. Plus, children enjoy making these between practice rounds, in preparation for the performance.



Figure 3. Students using labels with the name and picture of the characters they are playing in a readers' theatre⁴

Adapting Readers' Theatre to Large Classrooms

Feel free to adapt the process for a big class. You can have multiple groups perform the same play or each group can perform a different scene from a long play. You can assign different days for each group's practice. When one group rehearses aloud, rest of the students can follow along

⁴ Source: www.strategiesforspecialinterventions.weebly.com

in their copies. You can keep them involved by asking for feedback on their classmates' performance, suggestions on how to read certain dialogues, and so on.

The key point is that this activity should be engaging and purposeful for the students. Try it out in your class. Students will love it and will ask for many more readers' theatre sessions for sure!

References

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