

## Tracing Back to Drama in the Classroom History: Readers Theater

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### Abstract

Readers theater, a reading instructional strategy that has not received much attention in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and educational research in Thailand. Importantly, little to none research on using readers theater to enhance Thai student's English skills addressed the history of this reading method. This academic article aims to introduce readers theater through the historical lenses. The timeline and the theory support reader theater are provided. Also, the motives that led the American society to extensively focus on literacy are discussed. Understanding the past events of reader theater could broaden EFL teachers and scholars' perspective and to urge them of implementation the new teaching method in their English classroom.

**Keywords:** Readers Theaters, Literacy, Reading Strategy, EFL in Thailand

## Introduction

Even though readers theater is widely known among educators and teachers in the United States, not many people realize the value and how fascinating the story behind this teaching method is. Moreover, in the context of teaching and learning in Thailand, this reading strategy is considered new and is hardly mentioned in educational research (Ruengwatthakee, 2021, p.6).

Readers theater is an evidenced-based practice that provides students of all ages and educational levels the opportunity to engage in reading aloud activities. When implementing readers theater in the classroom, a group of students will be given multiple times to practice the scripts and perform their roles. Unlike other kinds of reading performances (i.e., storytelling, musical plays), readers theater is a unique method because students can always hold the script when performing, while props, costumes, and stage setting are not required. Among several types of instructional methods, readers theater has been proved by many scholars that it can be used as an effective teaching tool to promote and enhance students' literacy, especially reading fluency (Bruckman-Laudenslager, 2019; Rasinski, Rupley, Paige & Nichols, 2016; Young, Durham, Miller, Rasinski & Lane, 2019). The purpose of this academic paper is to present the literacy history related to readers theater, method, theory, and influences that associated with this alternative teaching method as well as to introduce the new reading strategy to English teachers, researchers, and educators in Thailand. In the following parts, a historical aspect of readers theater including theory and motives that lead to teaching reading fluency in the United States nowadays and implications will be concisely presented and discussed.

## Historical perspective at the origins of readers theater in brief

According to Marshall (2017, p.7), some historians believe that readers theater can be traced back from Ancient Greece approximately 2,500 years ago, but there is no evidence to support this assumption. However, it was found that readers theater was originally created in the early 1800s. Specifically, a book entitled "Chironomia" that was written in 1806 by an Irish author, Gilbert Austin, that explains about a kind of group performance that many people sitting reading various genres of stories and poems with expressions. In the United States, the term "readers theater" was first used in 1945 in New York by a group of theater performers. In 1951, readers theater became extensively well-known across the nation when it was developed by Paul Gregory, an American professional theater producer. Back then, this new type of entertainment consists of a few readers and a big group of choral and was not

for academic purpose. It was not until the 1970s, when readers theater was applied to secondary English education and was later pervasive in other subject areas (Marshall, 2017, p.8). Last 15 years, readers theater has been placed more in reading curriculum and instruction in the United States. Additionally, the notion behind readers theater is grounded from the method of repeated reading, which will be presented in the next section.

**Repeated Reading.** The repeated reading method serves as a dominant frame of readers theater and was introduced by Samuels (1979, p.403). Repeated reading is originally rooted from automaticity theory (Laberge &Samuels, 1974). According to Laberge &Samuels (1974) automaticity in reading refers to reading accurately and effortlessly with appropriate speed. The cornerstone of repeated reading is to develop reading fluency for learners in all levels of reading skill, particularly those who are struggling readers. Samuels (1979, p.404) claimed that when students have an opportunity to reread a short-selected passage or story that they are interested multiple times, their reading speed tends to increase, while the number of word recognition errors tends to decrease.

Additionally, Samuels (1979, p.405) addressed that repeated reading not only build fluency, but also comprehension. In other words, after students practice their reading the same text several times including answering comprehensive questions related to the text, their reading comprehension will be improved. As he stated that “As less attention is required for decoding, more attention becomes available for comprehension” (Samuels, 1979, p.378). Furthermore, Tracey, Diane & Morrow (2017) pointed out that repeated reading is “reflective of Mental Discipline Theory because it is built on the basic premise that reading skill, like a muscle, needs to be exercised to be strengthened” (p.30). Figure 1 illustrates the literacy genealogy of readers theater that relates to the method of repeated reading



**Figure 1** Literacy genealogy of readers theater relating to repeated reading method

Based on the method of repeated reading, it can be said that readers theater is an effective instructional activity that targets on reading fluency and reading comprehension. Engaging in a group performance, which provides a safe environment, especially struggling readers are encouraged to practice their scripts that they are interested until they gain more confidence (Bruckman-Laudenslager, 2019; Clementi, 2010; Merritt, 2015; Worthy & Prater, 2002).

#### **Readers theater: How important it is.**

As aforementioned, readers theater is a drama-based activity that engages and motivates learners to read and promote reading proficiency in a friendly environment. Essentially, reading competence is considered a foundation of knowledge and academic success. Now that the world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic that has a huge impact on humankind, education has also been unavoidably influenced by this unprecedented situation. Thus, the power of literacy, especially critical thinking skill plays a crucial role in terms of consuming news and information. Fake news related to this global pandemic is seemingly spreading faster than the virus, particularly on social media and led some people to get panic, anxious and irritated because of lacking knowledge of critical literacy. As a result, it is crucial that various techniques should be implemented in the classroom in order to provide students opportunity to promote reading skills and make the texts become more meaningful. Among several literacy instructional tools, readers theater is one of the methods that can be used effectively with all grade levels and not limit to native or non-native speakers of English as well as students with special needs. Also, it can be applied in all subject matters (Clementi, 2010; Rasinski et al., 2017; Worthy & Prater, 2002; Young, Durham, Miller, et al., 2019)

In terms of using readers theater in a face-to-face classroom in previous research, there are a number of empirical research showed that it is an effective teaching method that helps develop reading proficiency, create friendly classroom, and motivate students to read (Rasinski et al., 2016; Schoen-Dowgiewicz, 2016; Young et al., 2017; Young et al., 2019). Last past decade, educational and applied linguistic research on using this reading strategy to improve English reading skills with English language learners or students who are speaking English as a foreign language have been increasing as well (Bruckman-Laudenslager, 2019; Lekwilai, 2016; Lin, 2015; Merritt, 2015; Patrick, 2008). Moreover, last several years, readers theater has been used greatly in educational research conducted by an American professor in literacy names Chase Young. One of his recent research studies (Young, Stokes, &Rasinski, 2019) expanded the use of readers theater from focusing only reading fluency to reading comprehension and word study. This research also demonstrated the new framework on how to implement readers theater to students on Monday to Friday. In addition, readers theater can be used both in on-site and online classroom settings.

### **Benefits of Reader theater for the digital classroom**

In this digital era, especially when the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly shifted teaching to the online format unavoidably, this change, however, does not stop language teachers and educational researchers to bring activities into the classroom. In other words, not only readers theater can be used in a face-to-face classroom, instructors can find benefits of this alternative reading tool in the remote teaching as well. Specifically, the whole process of implementing readers theater in the class can be done through online platform. For instance, teachers can easily find the scripts that are available on websites. A cloud-based video conferencing service like Zoom allows students to practice their scripts in a small group in breakout rooms. Moreover, students' performance can be uploaded to social medias or the video sharing service like Youtube. One recent study by Ruengwatthakee (2021) examined the effect of readers theater on the improvement of Thai collage' student's English pronunciation. She implemented this reading strategy in the Phonetics course through the Zoom meeting. Even though the quantitative results did not show a significant gain after the 14 weeks of intervention, the qualitative findings, however, showed that most participants enjoyed this drama activities and felt more confident when pronouncing English words. Moreover, the majority of students expressed that they were motivated to practice their oral skills and work collaboratively with their peers through online readers theater. Moreover, Ruengwatthakee found that most

participants indicated that they have less anxiety during practicing the scripts and performing because they do not need to memorize the text. Importantly, some of them pointed out that they feel more comfortable reading aloud in the virtual classroom because they were allowed to turn off the video on Zoom. In the following part, influences, motivations for reading fluency in the United States as well as the researcher's personal reflection will be presented and discussed.

## Discussion

As mentioned above that reader theater has long history, it is interesting to discover more how this teaching method can connect to the history of reading instruction in the United States. Specifically, how reading has been considered the important fundamental knowledge as well as how the social and political influences and motivations had affected on reading in American society. Besides, readers theater in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Thailand and literacy in the current crisis will be discussed.

**Expanding knowledge and technological revolution motives.** It is mesmerizing how the direction of reading in America changed after World War II. According to Bonton-Smith (2002), during 1950 to 1965, which is around the same time that readers theater was first introduced to American society, the importance of reading instruction was placed substantively by educators and the government. Given that America had a strong desire and determination to become the world's leading country in democracy and technology, literacy took priority over any other subject matters to prepare citizens well in a workforce and a daily basis. As Bonton-Smith (2002) states that "what a child is leaning in school today or what an adult learned in school yesterday may be of little or no use to him tomorrow" (p. 288).

The primary concerns mentioned above have a tremendous impact on developing reading instruction at high school, college and adult levels in various aspects include reading objective, reading courses, professional reading books, teaching reading materials (Bonton-Smith, 2002). Reader theater is one of many reading strategies that was created under the drive of the nationalism motive to enhance learners' reading proficiency in this reading readiness period. Although readers theater was not incorporated in reading curriculum until around 1970s, it has broadly become more recognized by scholars as an effective teaching reading method for both natives and English language learners especially last past 15 years (Marshall, 2017; Rasinski et al., 2016; Schoen-Dowgiewicz, 2016; Young et al., 2017; Young et al., 2019).

**Readers Theater in the Thai EFL Context.** In the Thai EFL context, for the past decade, there are merely a few empirical research studies found on readers theater (Lekwilai, 2014; Lekwilai, 2016; Ruengwatthakee, 2021; Thienkalaya & Chusanachoti, 2020). The former study by Lekwilai (2014) aims to present how to implement readers theater in the reading classroom and its benefits, while the latter study reported that Thai college students' English reading proficiency was improved significantly after the intervention (Lekwilai, 2016). Furthermore, the research studies conducted by Lekwilai, (2021), Ruengwatthakee (2021), Thienkalaya, & Chusanachoti (2020) focus on using readers theater to improve Thai college students' pronunciation. It was found that not only participants made significantly gain on their oral skills, the results from qualitative part showed that students enjoyed and were motivated to read texts with their peers. Taken together, it can be clearly stated that readers theater is not well known among language teachers, educators, and researchers in Thailand.

In the United States, there are various reading activities provided to students to promote literacy and motivate learners to read, such as literacy circle, guided reading, etc. In the Thai EFL context, however, most of Thai teachers are still employing traditional methods of teaching reading (e.g., grammar translation and memorization). English language structure is always seen by English teachers in Thailand as the first and foremost skill for students to acquire. Moreover, most of Thai students perceive English language learning as a very challenging subject and they often have moderate to high anxiety when learning English in the classroom (Akkakoson, 2016; Boonkongsaen, 2014). Additionally, last past decade, the Ministry of Education in Thailand mandated a high-stake test for K-12 students called Ordinary National Education Test (ONET), which was adapted from the standardized test in America. Consequently, the main aim of teaching was deviated to teaching to pass the test, which is hardly possible for both teachers and students to seek for the extra time to develop teaching and learning reading and writing both in and outside the classroom.

## Conclusion

The interesting timeline of reader theater shows how it can be linked to both social and political influences during after the World War II period. More specifically, many educators and scholars in that time period were urged to reconsider reading education for the American citizen to step forward to helping the nation become one of the world's greatest nations. Thus, it is fascinating to observe and understand how the past events are associated to readers theater that has been used a great deal in the classroom and research the United States. Regarding the context of

English teaching in Thailand, teachers and educators are highly recommended to employ readers theater in their classroom to enhance students' reading skills. This article would encourage readers, especially English teachers or scholars to try to employ or apply this new teaching method in the context of teaching and learning reading in the English classroom in Thailand but in the same situation of teaching English as drama theater. As mentioned already, readers theater has been proved as a kind of enjoyable and useful drama activity that can help engage learners in all levels to the effectiveness of reading (Clementi, 2010; Young, Stokes &Rasinski, 2017). Every now and then EFL teachers should ask themselves if they are trying to look for a new pedagogy and bring it to their reading classroom to motivate and improve students' reading skills or they are just using the same reading method over and over again.

### **Originality and Body of Knowledge**

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