

Strategies for Reading: Readers Theatre



Readers Theatre (RT) is a strategy of reading for performance that links all aspects of literacy in a purposeful and entertaining way for readers at all stages. RT is a type of ‘shared’ reading, which ‘exposes students to the power of books and gives them insight and agency around their own reading processes’.

Burkins & Yaris (2016) p. 75

Process

The RT process, from narrative text through to performance, involves students being actively engaged with the text as reader and performer. Close analysis of the narrative, and of the choices the author has made, requires application of detailed text analysis strategies. Then by taking on the character role, students become active participants in the text (Herzberg 2012 p. 134).



Here is an example of part of the process of developing RT, workshopped with Year 5 students.

In 'Rowan of Rin', Emily Rodda (1993), there is a key plot point early in the narrative where Rowan receives the map that the villagers will use to solve their problem. This makes it a good choice for RT.

Sheba is the wise old woman of the village, whom everyone distrusts. The text reads:

She again reached down into the basket beside her.

'And so indeed I must beg his pardon,' she cackled.

Then, fast as a striking snake, she threw a stick straight at Marlie, who yelled and jumped aside in her fright, leaving Rowan to take the full blow of the flying wood.

Rowan stumbled back and nearly fell, the stick clutched in his hand and blood beginning to drip from a gash in his forehead. Strong Jonn exclaimed in anger and stepped forward with clenched fists.

'A gift from Sheba,' snarled the old woman. 'And I do beg your pardon, Rowan of the Bukshah.'

'Sheba, you go too far!' thundered Strong Jonn.

Her lips curved. 'Do I?' she said. 'Well then, perhaps this meeting should be ended.'

Rodda (1993) pp18-19

A bonus is that Rodda uses the speaking verbs 'cackled', 'snarled' and 'thundered', all within the space of half a dozen lines. These were useful for meaning in this context, and extended vocabulary in general.

When transferring this passage into a script, the verbs were retained in their position as per the original text. They were bracketed to indicate they weren't to be spoken.



| CHARACTER | SCRIPT/SPOKEN TEXT |
|-------------|--|
| Narrator 1 | She again reached down into the basket beside her. |
| Sheba | And so indeed I must beg his pardon [she cackled]. |
| Narrator 2 | Then, fast as a striking snake, she threw a stick straight at Marlie, who yelled and jumped aside in her fright, leaving Rowan to take the full blow of the flying wood. |
| Narrator 3 | Rowan stumbled back and nearly fell, the stick clutched in his hand and blood beginning to drip from a gash in his forehead. Strong Jonn exclaimed in anger and stepped forward with clenched fists. |
| Sheba | A gift from Sheba [snarled the old woman]. And I do beg your pardon, Rowan of the Bukshah. |
| Strong Jonn | Sheba, you go too far! [thundered Strong Jonn] |
| Sheba | [Her lips curved]. Do I? [she said] Well then, perhaps this meeting should be ended. |

The verbs were explored, and meaning checked. Then they were practised – consideration of why Rodda chose those verbs, what the word means, who would use it and in what context, how the face looks, how the mouth is shaped for the spoken words and so on. What it means when Sheba’s ‘lips curled’? Then the verbs were transferred from the script/spoken text column to the character column, to indicate their use by the performer.





The text for the performance looked like this:

| CHARACTER | SCRIPT/SPOKEN TEXT |
|---|--|
| Narrator 1 | She again reached down into the basket beside her. |
| Sheba (cackling) | And so indeed I must beg his pardon. |
| Narrator 2 | Then, fast as a striking snake, she threw a stick straight at Marlie, who yelled and jumped aside in her fright, leaving Rowan to take the full blow of the flying wood. |
| Narrator 3 | Rowan stumbled back and nearly fell, the stick clutched in his hand and blood beginning to drip from a gash in his forehead. Strong Jonn exclaimed in anger and stepped forward with clenched fists. |
| Sheba (snarling) | A gift from Sheba. And I do beg your pardon, Rowan of the Bukshah. |
| Strong Jonn (thundering - he is very angry) | Sheba, you go too far! |
| Sheba (sneering) | Do I? [she said] Well then, perhaps this meeting should be ended. |

As the story unfolds, the reasons for Sheba's cackling, snarling and sneering become obvious. In RT students have a legitimate reason to reread this text, and to make the most of the knowledge that is yet to be revealed.

Benefits for the reader, audience and teacher

RT has numerous benefits.

- The process integrates reading, writing, speaking and listening
- All aspects of fluency are practised - accuracy, pronunciation, speed, intonation, phrasing
- Models of fluent reading are trialled
- All students can participate - the amount of text to be read can be controlled to match the skills of each reader
- There is increased significance of context clues for the reader – considering how a character might feel, or making note of the key pointers in text, such as the word 'sneered' in the 'Rowan of Rin' text above
- Text reading has to be coordinated with that of the other readers
- Students can hear how a reader's voice makes text make sense



- Active participation of all readers – ‘cast members’ - is required to achieve a satisfactory ‘performance’; collaboration is necessary
- The isolation of individual reading is removed
- The audience can visualize the action of the text.

Repeated reading

One benefit of RT is the need for purposeful repeated reading of a sound model of English. Each reading helps to build meaning from the small amount of text, and the process involves opportunities for multiple interpretations.

Re-reading to become familiar with a text is required for the attainment of Objective A –

‘... through the close study of texts, students will develop knowledge, understanding and skills in order to **communicate through ... reading ...**’

NSW English Syllabus K-10 (2012) p.16

with the focus on Outcomes ENe -4A – ‘*read predictable texts, practising phrasing and fluency, and monitor meaning ...*’ (p.39) through the Stages to EN3-3A - ‘*recognise and compare how composers use a range of language features ... to achieve their purpose*’ (p.108).

Readers Theatre is particularly useful for EAL/D learners for all the reasons above, and for its potential for teaching and learning both content and vocabulary (Young, Stokes and Rasinski, 2017). Hertzberg (2012) has an excellent chapter on using drama with EAL/D students, and clear advice for ways to develop scripts and to work with RT (Chapter 7, pp134-138).

There are numerous online sites which have pre-prepared RT scripts. It is strongly recommended that students develop their own in the context of their classroom.

Suggestions

Students can read the text silently or in pairs/groups.

Scripts can become an element of homework for extra practice.

Roles can be swapped and different interpretations can become part of the discussion. This can lead to a collaborative decision about role allocation.

RT can be performed for the rest of the class as part of the regular reading program, or performed for another class.

A reader's theatre can be built around almost any text. For narrative, one with plenty of dialogue works best.

References

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