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Readers Theatre: A different approach to English for struggling readers

Abstract

This article presents a study of the use of Readers Theatre in English lessons with groups of academically-challenged pupils in a Norwegian lower secondary school. The study is based on the teacher's logs, interviews with the teacher, a questionnaire answered by the pupils, and lesson observations. Readers Theatre, a group reading activity that can be used with a wide range of texts, was successfully incorporated into the curriculum with relatively small 'fordypning' (specialisation) groups in English. These pupils had opted for more English lessons instead of learning a second foreign language. Most of them struggled with English as their first foreign language and were struggling readers. However, the majority of the pupils experienced Readers Theatre as both enjoyable and educational. The experience had a positive effect on their confidence and motivation to read. It also helped to improve their reading fluency and accuracy, for example pronunciation, and facilitated growth in vocabulary. The experience of practising and performing as a group was especially satisfying and motivating for the pupils involved. The majority were keen to participate in other Readers Theatre projects.

Introduction and aims

This article presents a study of the use of Readers Theatre in English lessons with groups of lower secondary school pupils in a Norwegian school.¹ The pupils came from the same school and were in so-called 'fordypning' (specialisation) classes, namely learners who had chosen extra lessons of English in the 8th and 9th grades as an alternative to learning a second foreign language. Although the option of extra lessons in English is open to all pupils,² the majority choose to learn a second foreign language, such as German, French or Spanish. Those who choose specialisation in English are normally the most academically-challenged learners, those who struggle most with learning English as their first foreign language and who are the least motivated or inclined to learn another foreign language.

English specialisation, which spans over grades 8 to 10, has a separate curriculum consisting of two main areas (KL 2006: 113-114):

1. Investigating language and texts. This area emphasises experimenting with English through different text forms.
2. Text and meaning. This area emphasises understanding, assessing and expressing a wide range of text forms.

The learning outcomes for the subject include being able to experiment with different written and oral forms of expression in different genres and being able to read and present a range of fictional and prose texts.

The study describes how groups of 8th and 9th graders who generally struggled with English, and who to varying degrees lacked confidence and motivation in the subject, experienced Readers Theatre in their ‘specialisation’ lessons. The two main research questions were:

1. How would academically-challenged lower secondary school pupils respond to Readers Theatre in English ‘specialisation’ classes?
2. What would be the benefits of using Readers Theatre with these pupils?

The data is based on the teacher’s logs, interviews with the teacher, the pupils’ reactions to Readers Theatre, and lesson observations.

What is Readers Theatre?

Readers Theatre has its origins in ancient Greece, where wandering minstrels, ‘rhapsodes’, would recite epic poems, in particular the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Different rhapsodes would sometimes engage in dramatic dialogue between the different characters (Bahn, 1932, cited in Coger & White, 1967: 10). The tradition continued throughout different periods of history, for example through drama and interpretive reading in churches in medieval times. In the 1950s and 60s Readers Theatre was an accepted dramatic form both in the US and the UK, with professional productions including the Broadway production of *The Investigation* in 1966-67, and the Royal Shakespeare Company of London productions of *The Hollow Crown* and *The Rebel* (Coger & White, 1967: 10-14). During this period Readers Theatre was widely practised in colleges and universities, particularly in the US, and gradually became incorporated into schools, especially with younger learners.

Although Readers Theatre exists in many forms, in essence it always involves a group reading aloud a text from visible scripts with an authentic communicative purpose (Black & Stave, 2007: 6). The emphasis is on the oral reading of the text, the print coming alive through reading speed, intonation and stress (Hoyt, 1992: 582). Readers Theatre is a holistic method that integrates reading, speaking, listening and thinking (Rinehart, 1999: 75-6). It is a

collective, all-inclusive reading activity, allowing readers of different levels of reading ability to participate in a '*nonthreatening, controlled and prepared setting*' (Black & Stave, 2007: 4). It is especially useful for struggling readers as it provides them with a meaningful context to enhance their skills, interest and confidence. Readers Theatre almost always involves repeated readings of the text before performance, enabling readers to read the text with accuracy and expression (Millin & Rinehart, 1999: 74). It provides a meaningful and purposeful context for teachers to get pupils to repeatedly read a text in preparation for the performance reading (Martinez et al., 1999: 333). As Martinez et al. (1999: 326) point out: '*The performer's goal is to read a script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action.*' Readers bring to life characters, story or content material through their voices (Black & Stave, 2007: 3).

A wide range of texts can be used for Readers Theatre purposes. These may be fictional texts, such as narratives, short stories, folk tales, myths and extracts from novels, or non-fiction texts, such as biographies and autobiographies, diaries, speeches, letters, newspaper articles and historical documents (Black & Stave, 2007: 25). Martinez et al. (1999: 328) stress that choice of text is important as texts that are too difficult will affect accuracy, rate and expressiveness. Texts that pupils have written themselves can also be used for Readers Theatre (Hoyt, 1992: 582). Whatever text is used, it is necessary to adapt it for group reading by dividing it up into smaller units, often at the sentence level, which the different readers are allocated. They then take it in turns to read their segments until the whole text has been completed. Some readers may read more than others, for instance based on their ability levels (Black & Stave, 2007: 31).

Models of Readers Theatre

Shepard (2004) distinguishes between two main models of Readers Theatre. Firstly, in the 'traditional model', readers have relatively fixed positions, for example sitting or standing in a row or semi-circle. The text is divided between the readers so that, for example, each reader in a group reads the part of a character in a story. Alternatively, the reading may be divided between narrators providing background information, and characters reading dialogues. Another alternative is for the text to be divided randomly among the readers irrespective of whether it is narrative or character dialogue. In the 'developed model', in contrast, several or all of the readers are mobile. In Shepard's own adaptation of Readers Theatre those reading the roles of characters are mobile, while the narrators are stationary, for example four narrators, one in each corner of a room.³

If pupils are totally unfamiliar with Readers Theatre, the teacher normally introduces the concept to them, informs them of what kind of script they will be

working with and how long the process will take (Black & Stave, 2007: 20). The next step is to assign roles. It is also important to inform pupils about the audience, for example whether it is peers, school personnel, the school librarian or parents (Martinez et al., 1999: 330; Black & Stave, 2007: 5). Martinez et al. (1999: 330) discovered that rehearsals became meaningful when children realised they would be performing for an audience.

Studies of Readers Theatre

One of the major advantages of Readers Theatre is that it can be used with readers of different reading abilities. However, a number of studies have focussed on its success with weak and struggling learners (Rinehart, 1999; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Peebles, 2007; Chan & Chan, 2009). These learners often struggle with reading fluency, word recognition, comprehension, phonetic skills, motivation and confidence. According to Tyler and Chard (2000: 165-6), Readers Theatre gives struggling readers a real and legitimate reason to reread the same text several times, during the process of which they may experience improvement in different aspects of their reading. Rinehart (1999: 85) argues that Readers Theatre provides some children with the rare opportunity to *'be on equal footing with better readers.'*

One of the factors that motivates even struggling readers to participate in a Readers Theatre event is the fact that it is a group reading activity (Chan & Chan, 2009: 44). In some instances, children who had shunned other reading tasks eagerly participated in Readers Theatre, relishing the sense of togetherness as they listened to others and read themselves (Rinehart, 1999: 84). Tyler and Chard (2000: 166) found that collaborating with peers was one of the most appealing features of Readers Theatre; pupils did not feel alone as they read, they did not have to read the whole text, and they experienced breaks between their reading. With Readers Theatre pupils are motivated by the fact that they are working towards shared goals (Chan & Chan, 2009: 44) and show willingness to help each other during rehearsals (Uthman, 2002: 56). They develop their interpersonal, social and collaborative skills. As Black and Stave (2007: 14) comment: *'As students work together, their confidence grows, they begin to see themselves as part of a successful project, and they gain a sense of pride and satisfaction.'*

Another reason why Readers Theatre has been successfully implemented in classrooms is that it often takes place within a limited but clearly defined time span, so that pupils gain the satisfaction of having actually completed a manageable project and can see the rewards of their efforts (Black & Stave, 2007: 14). Deciding on the time span and organisation in general is normally the responsibility of the teacher. In Millin and Rinehart's (1999) study, pupils focussed on one script and performance a week, devoting 40 minutes a day for rehearsal. In Rinehart's (1999) study the average preparation time was five days,

with 15-20 minutes a day being set aside. In Martinez et al.'s (1999) study, each reader had read the script 15 to 20 times before the performance.

A number of studies have looked at the benefits of Readers Theatre (Samuels, 1997; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Martinez et al., 1999; Rinehart, 1999; Uthman, 2002; Peebles, 2007). For example, Samuels (1997) found that the technique of repeated readings of a text produced gains in reading speed, word recognition, comprehension and a reduction in reading errors. Samuels compared readers with athletes, who spend a good deal of time practising basic skills in order to develop speed and smoothness. Samuels (1999: 377) also found that gains in speed from reading one passage would transfer to a subsequent passage; the initial speed of reading a new passage becomes faster than the initial speed of reading the previous passage.

Millin and Rinehart (1999) carried out quantitative and qualitative research on a group of second graders. They compared an experimental group of 14 students with a control group of 14 students. The quantitative research was based on pre- and post test scores of variables such as oral reading comprehension and oral reading rate. The qualitative research was based on interviews with students. The quantitative analysis showed that Readers Theatre enhanced oral reading word recognition and comprehension of words. Those with the highest gains were those who had the lowest pre-test scores. Oral reading ability improved in successive texts; students transferred skills to new texts they read. There was also a definite change in attitude towards reading. The children became far more enthusiastic about reading, they put more effort into reading other material, read more books and enjoyed silent sustained reading more than previously (Millin & Rinehart, 1999: 79-84). They also displayed more positive attitudes to reading aloud. The students themselves felt that practice and reading more had turned them into better readers. Even struggling readers were keen on performing and wanted more scripts on which to practise. Millin and Rinehart (1999: 85) conclude:

The findings demonstrate that readers theatre activities may offer otherwise struggling readers an opportunity to read aloud with enhanced skill, including more accurate word recognition, better expression, and improved fluency.

Martinez et al. (1999) carried out a study of the influence of Readers Theatre on the reading fluency of second graders. They discovered that a group of second grade students doing repeated readings through Readers Theatre made twice the gains in reading rate than a control group and also improved on reading comprehension and expressiveness. The children's reading rate increased by an average of 17 words a minute for the second graders. The students were eager to practise because they knew they would perform later. As one pupil wrote in her log: *'I never thought I could be a star, but I was the best reader today.'* (Martinez et al., 1999: 333).

Rinehart (1999) presents a study of Readers Theatre with 22 elementary students, mostly first and second graders, who had all experienced serious reading problems. The students lacked basic print awareness and had problems with, for example, word recognition. The students generally responded positively to Readers Theatre and its potential. According to Rinehart (1999: 82): *'Results...indicate that it is possible to involve less-skilled readers in readers' theatre activities. The importance of particular instructional factors also emerged during the readers' theatre preparation and performances.'* One of the greatest benefits of Readers Theatre was on the students' confidence. Both pupils and teachers enjoyed the activities and were eager for new Readers Theatre experiences. Teachers were clearly able to see the connection between motivation, practice and confidence, and how important it is to increase the confidence of less-skilled readers. Many teachers experienced that students were proud to read in front of the group (Rinehart, 1999: 86).

Finally, Uthman (2002) describes how a class of at-risk third grade readers were eager to do what they hated most – reading aloud. The students had initially lacked internal motivation and the willingness and desire to help each other learn. Their enthusiasm for Readers Theatre therefore came as a complete surprise and thrill to the teacher. The students practised reading countless times, both silently and out loud and, in so doing, they were able to tackle new words and increase their comprehension. They also showed a willingness to help each other during rehearsals, thereby losing much of their anxiety about reading aloud. The students were very serious about what they were doing. They suddenly found themselves centre-stage, building both confidence and reading skills (Uthman, 2002: 56-57).

The teaching context

The present study involved the use of Readers Theatre in four English 'specialisation' classes in a lower secondary school during a period of two school years. The groups, ranging in number from seven to 11, totalled 36 pupils and were taught by the same teacher. Two of the groups were in the 8th grade, where they received three lessons a week in the subject, and two were in the 9th grade, where the time allotment was two lessons a week. The teacher spent approximately four to six lessons with each group on a Readers Theatre project. After introducing the pupils to the concept, the teacher presented the pupils with the text, allocated the roles and commenced working on the text. Following the initial lesson, two to three 45 minute lessons were normally spent on rehearsals before the pupils performed the text. In some cases the same group worked on a follow-up Readers Theatre project.

The principal form of Readers Theatre used by the subjects of this study was an adaptation of a traditional Readers Theatre model.⁴ It combined reading aloud with dramatisation, the two complementing each other. The model involved a

group of readers sitting in a semi-circle reading from scripts. Scenes dramatised by actors complemented the reading. Figure 1 illustrates this model of Readers Theatre with seven readers.⁵

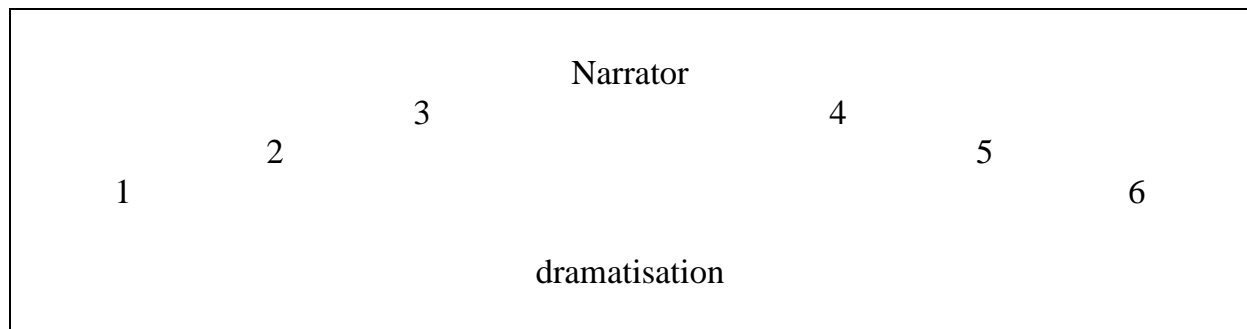


Figure 1: The plan of a traditional model of Readers Theatre

In this model, the readers always read in a fixed order: Narrator, Reader 1, Reader 6, Reader 2, Reader 5, Reader 3, Reader 4, Narrator, and so on. The Narrator has a prominent role among the readers, being the one who normally starts and finishes a text, who closes the reading before a dramatised scene and who starts a new sequence of reading after a dramatised scene.

Different texts were used by the groups in the study. However the text that was used most, and which appeared to be most successful with the groups, was a version of the fairy tale *Rumpelstiltskin* (McIlvain, 1990). The following extract of the beginning of the text illustrates how the fairy tale was adapted for Readers Theatre with seven readers.

Narrator: (Stand) Once upon a time, there was a miller.

1 (Stand) He had a beautiful daughter.

6 (Stand) She was a kind, shy girl.

2 (Stand) One day, as the king was passing, he saw her.

5 (Stand) “Wow!” She’s beautiful!” he said.

3 (Stand) “Yes”, said the miller, “And she’s very clever. She can turn straw into gold!”

4 (Stand) “What?” said the king. “Turn straw into gold? I can’t believe it! Bring her to my castle tomorrow. I want to see this with my own eyes.”

Narrator: Oh...oh....ok,” said the miller. He was already nervous.

In addition to reading aloud large sections of the text, this Readers Theatre adaptation of *Rumpelstiltskin* contained three dramatised scenes, which took place in front of the readers to complement what they had read. Ideally those involved in the dramatised scenes would not be the same as those reading aloud. However, when there were too few pupils in a group, pupils in some cases had the double role of both reader and actor. Moreover, to introduce variation and

mobility to the reading, the readers would sometimes stand before reading a segment and sit after reading another one. One of the most important and challenging details of this form of Readers Theatre, but one which helps the listeners to focus on the readers and enhance the total effect of the experience on the audience, is when the readers collectively look at whoever is reading at any given time.

Research methods

The current research may be considered as within the field of evaluation research, which aims to evaluate, for example, instructional methods, materials, programs, educators, or students (Borg & Gall, 1989: 742-4). Evaluation research aims to elicit data about the worth, merit or value of educational phenomena. It relies on accepted research tools, such as observation, interviews and questionnaires, which were all used in the current research. Evaluation research investigates the actual effects of the educational phenomenon in operation (Borg & Gall, 1989: 769). Evaluation researchers typically view their subjects as samples of larger populations of materials or groups to which the research findings will be generalized. An evaluation study can originate from the researcher's personal interest.

In this case, the first author had been interested in Readers Theatre since being introduced to the concept when working in a lower secondary school in 1984. He had then worked on a collaborative Readers Theatre project between Sogn og Fjordane Regional Theatre and his school, which were located near each other.⁶ When later working in Teacher Education, he had regularly introduced Readers Theatre to groups of student teachers of English. One of these was the teacher involved in the current Readers Theatre project, who later made contact with his former tutor with a view to trying out Readers Theatre in his 'fordypning' classes.

The research project may also be considered as lying within the field of Action Research, which originates from an educational problem and strives to make changes in order to improve the situation. Cohen and Manion (1994: 186) define Action Research as '*a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention.*' Action Research bridges the gap between research and practice, thus impacting on or improving practice. Moreover, Action Research increases teachers' awareness of classroom issues and broadens their views on teaching as they strive to improve their educational environment by changing it and learning from the consequences of the changes (Cohen et al., 2000: 227-228). Action Research can involve a variety of instruments for data collection, for example questionnaires, diaries, interviews, observational data, field notes, and video recordings. Finally, Action Research can be used to research a teaching method,

and can also be undertaken by a teacher in collaboration with a researcher (Cohen et al., 2000: 226).

The current research may be classified as Action Research because there was a specific educational problem at the outset which needed to be addressed, namely struggling readers who generally lacked confidence and motivation with English. It was addressed through the implementation of Readers Theatre, which had a positive effect on the learners and contributed to an improved educational environment. The research also conforms to some of the recognised principles of Action Research in that it was researching a specific teaching method and involved collaboration between a teacher and researchers.

The present study

The teacher's log

After each group had completed a Readers Theatre cycle, the teacher evaluated the process with the pupils in plenary, eliciting their reactions to the experience and writing these in a log. In addition, the teacher kept a log of his own reflections on the experience, both during the process of working with Readers Theatre with the different groups and after a cycle had been completed.

The pupil questionnaire

On completion of the first Readers Theatre project they had worked with, each pupil answered a Likert-format questionnaire consisting of 12 statements, to which they responded by crossing out one of five options denoting varying degrees of agreement or disagreement. Examples of the statements were:⁷

I normally like to read aloud in English.

Readers Theatre was a good way of practising oral English.

Readers Theatre has made me more confident in using English.

Readers Theatre has helped me to concentrate better.

It was difficult/stressful to participate in Readers Theatre.

It was fun to participate in Readers Theatre.

It was educational to participate in Readers Theatre.

I would like to take part in more Readers Theatre projects.

Lesson observations

The first author was invited to watch two of the groups giving performances of a Readers Theatre text, and to attend a lesson during which another group was rehearsing in the middle of a Readers Theatre cycle. The performances lasted for about 20 minutes and the rehearsal lesson for 45 minutes. During the performances the researcher noted the pupils' level of concentration, their ability to articulate the text and the extent to which they seemed to enjoy the

experience. During the rehearsal session, the researcher noted the degree to which the pupils were motivated and concentrated while working with the text, how they interacted with each other and how they interacted with the teacher. Although he was introduced to the pupils at the beginning of each of these lessons, the researcher was otherwise a passive observer of the proceedings.

Interviews with the teacher

The teacher was interviewed on five occasions using semi-structured interviews that allowed for both pre-planned questions to be asked but also for additional questions to be posed as the interviews evolved (Borg & Gall 1989: 452). The first interview took place before Readers Theatre was used by the teacher and elicited, for example, the teacher's reasons for trying the method out, the kinds of texts that might be suitable and his expectations. The next three interviews were conducted following the classroom observations. Questions were asked about, for example, how the pupils had responded to working with Readers Theatre, what the teacher's role had been, and how the pupils had benefited from the experience. The final interview took place after the teacher had finished using Readers Theatre with all the groups involved. In addition to summarising the benefits and challenges of working with Readers Theatre, the teacher was asked, for example, when in the school year it was best to introduce Readers Theatre, what was important during the process of working with Readers Theatre, and what adjustments it would be wise to make when working with Readers Theatre with future groups.

Findings

This section first presents the results of the pupils' responses to the questionnaire. It then presents some of the most salient data elicited from the teacher's logs, interviews with the teacher and observations of the groups participating in Readers Theatre.

Table 1 provides an overview of the pupils' questionnaire responses concerning their attitudes to Readers Theatre.

Table 1: Pupils' attitudes to Readers Theatre (actual numbers with percentages in brackets)

Statement (N = 36)	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Partly agree	Agree	Strongly agree	No answer
I normally like reading aloud in English	5 (14%)	5 (14%)	17 (47%)	8 (22%)	0	1 (3%)
The combination of reading aloud and dramatisation in Readers Theatre was exciting.	0	4 (11%)	15 (41%)	14 (39%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)
It was difficult/stressful to take part in Readers Theatre.	9 (25%)	12 (33%)	9 (25%)	5 (14%)	0	1 (3%)
It was fun to take part in Readers Theatre.	1 (3%)	3 (8%)	9 (25%)	14 (39%)	7 (19%)	2 (6%)
It was educational to take part in Readers Theatre.	0	2 (6%)	13 (36%)	13 (36%)	7 (19%)	1 (3%)
I would like to take part in another Readers Theatre project.	1 (3%)	5 (14%)	11 (30%)	13 (36%)	5 (14%)	1 (3%)

As Table 1 shows, almost three out of ten of the pupils were not normally favourably inclined to reading aloud in English, while roughly one out of two were in part favourably inclined. Almost one out of two of the pupils agreed or strongly agreed that the combination of reading aloud and dramatisation was exciting, with roughly four out of ten partially agreeing. 55% of the pupils did not consider it to be stressful or difficult to participate in Readers Theatre, while one out of four partially considered it to be difficult or stressful. Roughly six out of ten agreed or strongly agreed that it had been fun to work with Readers Theatre, with one out of four partially agreeing. Roughly the same number considered that it had been educational to work with Readers Theatre, while one out of three partially agreed. Finally, every second pupil was in favour of the idea of working on another Readers Theatre project, while three out of ten were partly in favour.

Table 2 provides an overview of the pupils' perceived benefits from using Readers Theatre.

Table 2: Pupils' perceived benefits of Readers Theatre (actual numbers with percentages in brackets)

Statement (N = 36)	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Partly agree	Agree	Strongly agree	No answer
Readers Theatre is a good way of practising oral English.	0	1 (3%)	8 (22%)	18 (50%)	8 (22%)	1 (3%)
Readers Theatre has given me more confidence in my ability to use English.	0	5 (14%)	16 (44%)	12 (33%)	1 (3%)	2 (6%)
Readers Theatre has improved my ability to concentrate.	0	5 (14%)	22 (61%)	8 (22%)	0	1 (3%)

As Table 2 shows, a clear majority, roughly seven out of ten of the pupils, agreed or strongly agreed that Readers Theatre was a good way of practising oral English. Only one pupil disagreed. Roughly one out of three agreed or strongly agreed that they had become more confident about using English, while 44% partially agreed. Finally, roughly two out of ten agreed or strongly agreed that Readers Theatre had helped their ability to concentrate, while roughly six out of ten partially agreed.

The teacher noted in his log that the pupils seemed to take to Readers Theatre right from the start. In fact he found it to be an excellent ice breaker for a group starting with English specialisation. After his initial experience of Readers Theatre, the teacher chose the method as the first project the pupils would work with when starting the school year, both in the 8th and 9th grades. It put them all on an equal footing and gave them a common goal. During one of the interviews the teacher commented on how shy several pupils in one of the 8th year groups had been initially, and how reluctant they had been to participate orally in English. However, the process of working with Readers Theatre had helped them to lose much of their shyness, which was also to their advantage after completing the Readers Theatre project. There was one pupil in particular who basically struggled with speaking in general, both in Norwegian and English, but who thrived when working with Readers Theatre, in spite of seeming rather nervous at the beginning. This pupil especially liked the idea of emphasising certain words in a sentence in order to add meaning to the text.

It also emerged from one of the interviews that one of the main attractions of working with Readers Theatre was the dynamics of the group experience, as confirmed by Rinehart (1999), Tyler & Chard (2000), Uthman (2002) and Chan and Chan (2009). The lesson observations revealed how the pupils seemed to enjoy the process of molding a text from written word on paper to something living and entertaining performed by the group. It was the actual reading of the text that was the main value of the exercise. Pupils experienced how everything came together as a whole as they practised. They quickly adopted the text as a whole product which they realised they all needed to present well for the presentation to be successful. In addition to being more fun and more nonthreatening than other activities they had experienced, Readers Theatre was perceived as different simply because it was a group experience. The teacher registered in his log that the pupils in all of the groups showed a willingness to work on the text on a fairly detailed level, more so than when they worked on other texts individually or in small groups. The “ownership” of the performance as a group seemed to make them want to perfect *their* part of the text both for themselves and for the group as a whole.

It was obvious that the pupils preferred the idea of working as a team as opposed to working alone or in pairs. As the teacher noted in his log:

It is always great to observe the group coming together as a whole... as they understand the dynamics of the text and recognise why the movement is included, they start to recognize that the sentences themselves are all connected and that some need to be presented fast or slow, with more or less volume and so on to achieve the flow of the story as a group.

As the group kept practising and working together, the teacher recorded how a group mentality arose that had not been there before. Each member of the group became preoccupied with the performance of the group as a whole instead of just worrying about their own contribution (c.f. Chan & Chan, 2009).

The teacher could clearly observe how Readers Theatre benefited the pupils in various ways. It was also fascinating to observe how fast the pupils improved. He noted how they managed to sound proficient after having worked through the text a few times. They seemed to enjoy working with the text and, experiencing the progress in their fluency, they kept working with it and practised until they achieved a good level of fluency in the reading of the text as a group. In order to show the pupils how they were progressing, the teacher sometimes took video recordings of rehearsals and showed them to the pupils before the next rehearsal. They were thus able to see the improvement for themselves.

Moreover, Readers Theatre created a bond between the group and the teacher which was comparable to that of a choir and choir master. The teacher pointed out in an interview that there was a greater willingness on the part of individual pupils to come to him for assistance, for example over the pronunciation of a word or how a sentence should sound in order for it to convey the meaning it was supposed to convey. He experienced a slight change in his own role in the classroom as the pupils started employing him as an *asset* towards their goal of producing the best performance possible for the group, which again signified the pupils' sense of ownership of the Readers theatre text. Although he had worked with the same pupils on many different forms of oral presentations, he had seldom experienced them being '*this preoccupied with perfecting their own speech and speech patterns.*'

The teacher was also impressed by how fast pupils who were already familiar with the method could adopt it when working with new texts (c.f. Millin & Rinehart, 1999). They seemed very happy to have another go at it, and were very efficient at dividing roles and choosing who said what. As he noted in his log:

What impressed me was how proficient they were in their approach to the new text. Knowing how the process worked, and what the "end result" looked like, the group started to work on the text immediately with little or no coaching from the teacher.

When discussing with his pupils their experience of working with Readers Theatre, the teacher had noted down the following reactions:

I thought it was good fun. All we had to do was read, stand and sit. There is a great difference between standing up there alone and reading as part of a group.

I liked it better than just reading from a book. Everyone was doing something at the same time, and it made it a lot easier to read English out loud.

When we performed, I liked that we stood up one after the other to read and that we had to deliberately look at the other readers as they did their reading.

It is scary to perform alone, so working in a group was very good. We sat down in a circle and read again and again.

What I liked about the process was the story. I had never heard it before, so it was fun to read and listen.

The potential of Readers Theatre assumed another dimension when one of the pupils in an 8th year group suggested making a Readers Theatre production as a way of informing the rest of the 8th year pupils what they did in their English specialisation subject. The group produced their own text and rehearsed it (c.f Hoyt, 1992). For the performance they made a photo show of their work in the subject, which was placed in the background to supplement the reading. The group received a hearty round of applause from the audience. The teacher recorded that other teachers in the school who worked with one or more of the pupils from the group on a daily basis, approached him afterwards and commented on how thrilled they were that the group had been able to produce such a professional looking and entertaining performance and how happy they were that *'the pupils looked so proud during the performance'*. He further noted in his log:

To experience mastery in the school day is something we all want for our pupils, and Readers Theatre is a way for pupils to achieve small victories in working with a foreign language on a day-to-day basis as well as the opportunity to, as a group, create a finished product to be proud of.

The teacher commented during an interview how pupils who at the outset had been shy about reading aloud gradually lost their inhibitions about reading aloud in front of the group. He summed up his experience of using Readers Theatre with specialisation groups in English as follows in his log:

I would say that the method worked wonderfully with pupils struggling to learn a foreign language. They had the opportunity to practise and perfect the language to a certain extent. If they had had to read large chunks of text, this would have been much

harder, and I doubt if they would have been willing to read as they were with a text divided into “bitesize” chunks.

Discussion

Much of the research into Readers Theatre in the classroom has been with very young learners in mother tongue contexts, especially in the USA (e.g. Martinez et al., 1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Rinehart, 1999). This study has shown how Readers Theatre can have cognitive and affective benefits with older learners, and in a foreign language. It has firstly confirmed the potential of Readers Theatre to enhance the reading fluency and accuracy of struggling readers, as demonstrated in studies such as Martinez et al. (1999), Millin and Rinehart (1999) and Samuels (1999). The teacher experienced, for example, how pupils’ pronunciation gradually improved as he pointed out the correct pronunciation of words during practice sessions. The teacher also experienced how reading fluency improved as the pupils reread texts and became more and more familiar with the content. Although their focus was on communicating the meaning of the texts, and not on the form of the texts, studies of reading in English as a foreign language have shown that, for example, vocabulary and syntax are developed when the focus is on reading for meaning and pleasure (Krashen, 1984; Elley, 1991). Furthermore, Day and Bamford (1998) argue how increased reading fluency is likely to lead to a greater desire to read.

Secondly, the study has also confirmed the potential of Readers Theatre to increase struggling readers’ confidence and motivation to read, as was the case in studies such as Millin and Rinehart (1999), Rinehart (1999) and Uthman (2002). Motivation, confidence and low anxiety are considered essential, not just to successful reading, but also to successful language acquisition in general (Krashen, 1982). Motivation, self-confidence and low anxiety are often directly affected by how the learner experiences classroom learning of a foreign language. A learning context in which learners feel that they can use the target language in meaningful communication is likely to increase their motivation and confidence, especially if takes place in a low anxiety situation. A teaching context where learners are unable to put the target language into natural use, for example in a grammar/translation approach (Howatt, 1984), may have a demotivating effect, at the same time negatively affecting learners’ confidence. Low achieving language learners especially need to see the practical benefits of learning a foreign language, namely that a foreign language is learned for communicative purposes and not as a pure academic exercise. Positive experiences in one aspect of language learning can be a catalyst for positive experiences in other aspects of language learning.

However, the successful implementation of Readers Theatre into classrooms depends on a number of factors. Firstly, the choice of text is an important issue. The teacher found that both the length and complexity of texts were important

(c.f. Martinez et al., 1999). The Rumpelstiltskin text seemed to be appropriate on both counts; it was not too long and the language was suitable to the pupils' level in English. In contrast, the teacher had adapted another text for Readers Theatre that turned out to be both too long and too difficult for one of the groups concerned. The sheer amount of text made it difficult to focus on details, such as the meaning and pronunciation of individual words. It was an effort simply to get through the whole text, so that quantity was at the cost of quality. This experience had made the teacher far more conscious about the importance of choosing the right kind of text when working on future Readers Theatre projects.

Secondly, the study shows that the teacher plays a crucial role in successfully implementing a Readers Theatre project in the classroom. The teacher concerned was familiar with the concept of Readers Theatre from the outset and was enthusiastic about its classroom potential. Some of his enthusiasm almost certainly transferred to the pupils. He was also conscious of his own growing awareness of important details during the process of using Readers Theatre. The teacher thus felt he was involved in a learning process himself, which would help him to make adjustments and improvements to future Readers Theatre projects. In addition to the importance of choosing the right text, he also discovered that it was best not to inform the pupils about all the details connected to Readers Theatre from the start, but to gradually introduce them to these details as they became more familiar with the text, such as looking at whoever was reading at any given time. He described this as gradually introducing the 'layers' of Readers Theatre.

One limitation of the study is that only one teacher was involved and that the groups were relatively small. Since the groups were relatively small, the teacher was able to monitor each individual's progress and give regular feedback to each member of the group. Group size therefore becomes a pertinent issue. Organising Readers Theatre in a large class is more challenging than in a small group, where each member is working on the same text. A large class involved in Readers Theatre would probably necessitate two or more groups working on different texts, with the teacher's attention divided among the groups, and therefore less attention from the teacher to each individual. It would also pose physical challenges, such as providing different rooms or areas where the different groups could rehearse their texts without disturbing each other. If pupils know in advance, by inadvertently witnessing rehearsals, what other pupils will be performing, it would detract from their experience of the performance itself.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to investigate how struggling lower secondary school pupils would respond to Readers Theatre in English specialisation classes

and, secondly, what benefits Readers Theatre would have for these pupils. In general the pupils responded positively to Readers Theatre; many experienced it as a low anxiety activity in which it was both fun and educational to participate. The teacher was struck by the enthusiasm, effort and commitment the pupils put into it. In terms of benefits, the majority of the pupils considered Readers Theatre as a good way of practising oral English and many felt it had made them more confident in using English. The teacher observed how the pupils had improved their reading fluency and accuracy, and how their motivation and confidence had increased. Although this study focussed on struggling learners in English, Readers Theatre has a potential with learners of different abilities, and can also be used in both mother tongue classrooms and with other foreign languages.

To gain a broader picture of the benefits of Readers Theatre, it would be beneficial to research the use of Readers Theatre among greater numbers of pupils of different ages and in different teaching contexts. For example, since much of the research into Readers Theatre has been conducted with young learners, it would be valuable to investigate its potential among primary school learners in Norway, both in mother tongue and English language classrooms. It would also be interesting to replicate in English as a foreign language the kind of mother tongue study carried out by Millin and Rinehart (1999), which used both quantitative and qualitative methods, for example measuring reading rate and accuracy before the implementation of Readers Theatre in a class or classes and comparing scores after the completion of a Readers Theatre project.

In a world pervaded by information transfer, Readers Theatre provides a different, dynamic and educational forum for meaningfully communicating fiction and non-fiction texts in schools.

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¹ A much shorter article based on a limited amount of the data in the present article was published as 'Readers Theatre: how low achieving 9th graders experienced English lessons in a novel way.' In Groven, B., Guldal, T.M, Lillemyr, O.F., Naastad, N. & Rønning, F. (eds.), FoU i Praksis 2008. Rapport fra konferanse om praksisrettet FoU i lærerutdanning, 51 - 58. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag.

² Pupils can also choose 'specialisation' in Norwegian or Sami.

³ Aaron Shepard's Readers on Stage, Stories on Stage and Folktales on Stage provide both an introduction to Readers Theatre and a considerable number of texts adapted for Readers Theatre. Shepard also has a website with Readers Theatre guidelines and texts:

<http://www.aaronshp.com>. Ion Drew has also written guidelines on how to use Readers Theatre in language teaching, which appear on Fremmedspråksenteret's web pages under 'Reading in English: A Teacher's Guide':

<http://www.fremmedspraksenteret.no/index.php?ID=16270>.

⁴ The model was introduced into Norway in 1984 by the late Professor Leighton Ballew in cooperation with Sogn og Fjordane Regional Theatre. Ballew considered Readers Theatre to have a great potential in schools and considered it to be an all-inclusive, rather than elitist, activity.

⁵ The text, like any other, can be adapted to fewer or more readers.

⁶ The text was called 'Sprit Aquavit, Horse Macca Blås' and was written by the local playwright, Rolf Losnegård. It was about teenage drink and drug abuse in Sogn og Fjordane.

⁷ The questionnaire was originally in Norwegian, but has been translated into English for purposes of presentation in this article.