

Roald Dahl characterisation unit with a class study of his biography, *Boy*, and found plenty of reflections of the villainous characters from his books in the descriptions of his own experiences. Tag Reading was used as literature circles read all or parts of the text together.

Get set!

To tag read, the group sits in a tight circle, and one student begins to read. The rest of the group follows along, each in his or her own book. Some of my students need to use their fingers to track the text effectively or to help them stay focused. The first reader tags another random student to carry on by tapping him or her on the knee. The trick is to keep the text flowing as if one voice were reading. Students can also choose to tag off in the middle of a word, such as after a syllable or before a suffix, to make the tag off more playful.

While teaching the Tag Reading technique, I joined the circle. Initially, all students tagged off to me, and I controlled who would be tagged next. As the students took over more control I would sometimes tag (tap) the student reading and begin to read before tagging off to another child who had been left out in order to ensure that all children were getting a turn. This is called tagging away, and helped to emphasise taking turns at reading. I found that this was no longer necessary once the children were used to Tag Reading. Tagging away can be useful if a student is reading too long and needs to be encouraged to tag more often or if you want to head off a rough passage for an insecure reader. If there are not enough strong readers in a group the teacher can become part of the circle and have the children tag off to him or her for the rough parts and then can tag them back on passages they can read more successfully.

The children soon caught on and invented elaborations. Weaker readers could tag off as soon as they hit a tricky word and could control the length of the section they read. We kept the atmosphere playful, and the children soon learned to see that everyone was tagged and to keep a steady, natural reading pace. My students began to create their own variations; Tag Reading leaked into partner reading, subject reading,

and homework. One pair of boys even worked out a system to tag read on the telephone. Many parents expressed pleasure at seeing their reluctant readers choosing to read at home.

Go!

Tag Reading requires the well-developed listening vocabulary, good sense of story language and sequencing, and prediction skills typical of older, more experienced readers. It is therefore less helpful for younger children who have not yet had enough experience with book language. I recommend Tag Reading as an ideal technique for stress-free reading from Grade 3 on up. Tag Reading gives weaker readers access to more complex literature and enables them to work more effectively with a cooperative, mixed-ability learning group. In my class, students using Tag Reading demonstrated higher motivation; completed their reading tasks without reminders; and participated more actively in discussions, activities, and presentations. They were able to support their opinions by referring to the text more often and had a better grasp of the sequence of story events when preparing their reading response activities. Tag Reading was definitely a success in my third-grade class. It is simple to learn and simple to apply, so give it a try.

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"Can we act it out?"

Barbara Ryan Larkin

After hearing me read a story they enjoyed, my first graders often asked, "Can we act it out?" In choosing different ways for my stu-

dents to respond to a story during small guided reading groups, I would sometimes let them do so. This was a popular activity and easy enough to do with a small group. My first graders were imaginative and active, so their enthusiasm for this type of response led to repeated requests to act out stories with the whole class. Though I occasionally agreed to let the class perform a simple fairy tale or folk tale like "The Three Bears," more often my immediate response was negative. I never felt comfortable with dramatics. Acting out a story takes time, and there just was not enough in our busy schedule. The very words "Can we act it out?" triggered visions of disorganization, overexcited children all wanting the main part, inevitable hurt feelings, and a great deal of noise. However, my main justification for continually ignoring this call for dramatics was the loss of valuable instruction time. So my standard reply became "maybe later," and later never came. Anyway, we did have our musical programs for the holidays and Mother's Day when the children sang songs together. Obviously music was a comfortable area for me. I would leave the dramatics to a more artistic teacher.

Reading the research

These rationalizations served me well until I began reading different theories and research during my graduate courses. I frequently encountered positive reasons for using drama in a classroom as part of reading instruction. Drama is presented as a meaningful context for children to read, write, speak, and listen (Pappas & Brown, 1987). Struggling students especially seem to be motivated by this experience (Bidwell, 1990). The theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) argues that using various approaches for teaching allows individuals to demonstrate strong ability in a specific area and to develop their weaker areas. Many different ways of knowing exist. Participating in a play includes the bodily/kinesthetic intelligence as a physical aspect of learning. The use of various sign systems for communication, construction of meaning, and thought allows learners to weave together many different interpre-

tations and understandings (Leland & Harste, 1994).

A specific reading interpretive activity, Readers Theatre, appeared often in the literature as a way to use drama effectively in a classroom. It was the following concise description (Sloyer, 1982) that prompted me to consider using drama in my classroom:

So begins a Readers Theatre. It is not a play. There are no stage sets, no elaborate costumes, no memorized lines. It is not ordinary reading with dull word by word reading. Readers Theatre is an interpretive activity for all the children in the classroom. Children bring characters to life through their voice and gesture. Listeners are captivated by the vitalized stories and complete the activity by imagining the details of scene and action. (p. 3)

Readers Theatre offers many benefits for children's literacy learning as they practice and perform with their peers. As two or three students practice a script together in a Readers Theatre, struggling readers have the opportunity to develop their reading skills. The values of listening and speaking in this real context, just as in reading and writing, are an integral part of the reading process (Fox, 1987). In a classroom with authorship, students can read orally with emphasis on interpretation. "Theoretically, Readers Theatre allows stories to come to life.... The sound of the language adds a new dimension of meaning" (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988, p. 138). Readers Theatre also requires collaboration among children, providing a successful means of fostering talk and eliminating labels for reading ability (Wolf, 1993). Children must practice reading a script many times for a Readers Theatre performance. These repeated readings help to develop fluency (Rasinski & Padak, 1996a, 1996b).

In extensive research on repeated reading, Samuels (1997) found that repetitive practice of text increases comprehension as well as fluency, especially for struggling readers. Children remember and understand more as they reread a story (Dowhower, 1989). Motivation also has a critical role in how young children learn to read (Gambrell, 1996). A study conducted with second graders compared the use of interpretive drama with the workbook activities used in conjunction with basal readers (Hendersen & Shanker,

1978). Significant improvement in comprehension resulted from the interpretive drama approach. The children clearly preferred dramatics to the workbook exercises and displayed a greater interest in reading. Motivation was evident in their desire to act out stories during independent reading. As I read all of this information, it became increasingly clear to me why my students were so persistent in asking me, "Can we act it out?"

Theory into practice: Guiding the children

There is no one correct way to do a Readers Theatre. It can involve reading poetry chorally, dividing poems into parts for groups of children to read, using ready-made scripts, or creating and adapting scripts from literature read in class. Initially I chose to work with two small groups with similar reading ability to build confidence (mostly my own). We discussed dialogue, quotation marks, and the difference between narrator and character texts. I showed them how to highlight scripts that were created from the book they were currently reading in their guided reading group. I reviewed this lesson with the class as a whole several times. This built on the knowledge the children had from our daily routines of reading poems and chants together. I explained how each group of two to four children should coordinate voices when reading a character's dialogue together in a Readers Theatre script. I also demonstrated the importance of the narrator's part for relating the events in the story.

After a shared reading of Don Freeman's book *Corduroy* (1968), I modeled how to interpret a character's mood from the text by rereading the story with a great deal of feeling and expression. Then we practiced retelling the story together as a group, using the framework from the Story Retelling Summary Sheet (Morrow, 1989), a 10-point rubric for recalling specific story elements. I did this to ensure that all children understood the entire story and not just their individual parts. This all took some time but the careful preparation was necessary for understanding the process. The class was fortunate at this time to have an opportunity to see a Readers Theatre performance by third

graders. The children were so excited and motivated they immediately pressured me to get them some new scripts.

First graders take charge

There was no discussion about the next step. They definitely wanted to do Readers Theatre with the whole class. After reading "Jack and the Beanstalk," I introduced the Danish adaptation of this folk tale called "The Skipping Pot" (in Bauer, 1987). I read the story first and helped the children with the vocabulary. We then read the entire script together several times to become familiar with the different parts and characters. I then let the children choose friends who would share a specific character or narrator part. Though I made some suggestions for these parts, the children worked this out very well on their own. Two struggling readers chose to be buddies; although I questioned the wisdom of this I let it be.

I gave the children highlighters, using a different color marker for each character. I told them to get organized and mark their parts, and then I stepped back to observe them. The reactions of the children amazed me. They helped one another outline their parts and then spread out to all corners of the room, and out into the hall to practice. I watched, admiring their eagerness and enthusiasm. If anyone asked for assistance I gave it, but mostly they helped one another. They read the whole play with their partners to help them develop an awareness of the entire script and learn their cues. We gathered together and practiced reading through the story once again while sitting on the floor. We rehearsed like this several times a week, first with characters working on their common part, then together. The children were disappointed when it was time for lunch. They would have to wait until the next day to do a real performance.

Showtime

The next day children were eager to practice "The Skipping Pot." They rehearsed again in small groups, then the whole class read the entire script together. When the children announced they were ready to perform "The

Skipping Pot” without my interruptions, I helped them get in their stage positions as we had rehearsed. Each group of children representing a single character or a narrator stood closely together, forming a semicircle along one side of the room. I sat in front of them in a chair and became the audience. With no prompting from me, they began. This was the best “kid watching” I had ever been able to do. I observed children listening to one another, coordinating their voices, and using the expressions and movements they had created together. The personalities of some quieter students became totally transformed. They were so much stronger with the partnership reading. The more dramatically inclined put their heart and soul into it. There were no apparent levels or reading abilities on that stage. Everyone was a star and displayed confidence in this group effort, including the emerging readers. They loved doing this and naturally asked if they could do it again the next day.

The following morning when the children took out the scripts for “The Skipping Pot” they approached me with the inevitable question, “Can we perform this time for an audience?” Moving with the teachable moment, I invited the teacher next door to bring her class to watch my students perform “The Skipping Pot.” The entire Readers Theatre experience took on new life when the children found out an audience would be coming to see them. They quickly pushed back the desks, lined up chairs like a movie theater, and very professionally assumed their stage positions. The audience arrived. I told the children that I would only explain to our guests that this was an adapted folk tale. Then they were on their own. Again they began without my direction. This performance was much stronger, and the interpretations and actions much more pronounced. The children were proud, the audience was happy, my colleague was impressed, and I was converted. Drama would now become a permanent part of my literacy program.

The benefit of increased comprehension was evident after several productions. I found the children’s written retellings were much more detailed, and their scores on Story Retelling Summary Sheets improved substantially.

They accurately remembered story problems and solutions and vividly recalled events. By acting in a Readers Theatre, the class had gained a clearer and deeper insight into the sense of story. They had built a framework or schema for retelling. Subsequently, when I read an unfamiliar story to them, their retellings were generally much richer than those written before our Readers Theatre experience.

Suggestions for implementing Readers Theatre

With nine first-grade classrooms in our school, the news of a motivating and pleasurable way to teach reading to the children spread quickly. I shared scripts with colleagues, and my students were delighted to demonstrate Readers Theatre with repeated performances in other classrooms. My positive experiences and the following suggestions adapted from *Readers Theatre: Performing the Text* (Hill, 1990) helped several colleagues implement Readers Theatre in their classrooms.

- Take plenty of time to prepare the students. Readers Theatre is primarily oral interpretation, and this can be practiced with poems or chants. Model expressive reading often.
- Choose the texts to read aloud carefully. They should have fast-moving plots and language within the children’s reach. For a whole-class performance of Readers Theatre, use scripts with several characters so groups of two to four children can share the part for the same character.
- Teach the basic steps of Readers Theatre: how to find the character’s name and dialogue (the character’s names are on the left for most scripts), how to use highlighters to mark the text, how to hold the script and read expressively, and how actors assume specific stage positions.
- Practice, practice, practice.
- Allow children to practice in different ways, with their common characters in small groups and together with whole-class rehearsals.
- Keep a copy of the marked script at school and send one home for parents to read and practice with their children.

- Give short presentations at first. These can be increased or decreased in length depending on the group. Shorter scripts keep the children attentive and focused during Readers Theatre practices and performances.
- Perform for an audience as often as possible.
- Add some items of clothing (hats, shirts) or include motions. This is optional but enjoyable.
- Set up the children’s chairs like a theater for the audience if possible. It adds a nice touch.
- Trust the children. Guide them but allow them ownership of their performance.

Extending Readers Theatre

It was a combination of learning about the benefits of using drama in the classroom along with those very persistent children begging to act that resulted in Readers Theatre becoming an integral part of my reading program. Many students possessed a flair for the dramatic that could not be ignored. Readers Theatre in our classroom is not a static entity. Like all successful literacy building, it is a dynamic process, with adaptations and improvements each year. I involve parents in Readers Theatre by sending scripts home to help get ready for a performance. Family members often assume different character parts to help the children practice.

Readers Theatre has also become a center in our classroom. After completing a performance, the scripts and a box of assorted old clothes remain available for children to perform a familiar script. This area for dramatics also has new scripts and highlighters so that students can work together underlining and practicing new parts. When a group is ready to perform, we arrange a time for the class to watch them. The whole-class performance that has the larger audience still remains a favorite. Readers Theatre also enriches the meetings with our cross-grade buddies as third graders and first graders enjoy performing Readers Theatre for one another.

Motivation and meaning

Readers Theatre is just one possible way of incorporating drama in a classroom. Implementing Readers Theatre changed my perspective that drama was something outside of curriculum. It is an authentic way of motivating children, developing fluency, and building comprehension through repeated reading. The collaboration necessary for Readers Theatre also supports and assists struggling readers. Preparing for a Readers Theatre presentation did not take extra instructional time. As a part of a balanced literacy program in our first-grade classroom, it is instruction that is constructive, meaningful, and fun for the children.

As a lifelong learner, this experience has taught me the value of asking questions that come from my teaching practice as well as the benefit of considering the research of others. I have also been reminded how important it is to listen to the children. Now in our first-grade classroom whenever I read that favorite story and someone says, "Can we act it out?" I know exactly what I will answer.

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