

Readers Theatre and Assessment for ESL/ESD Learners

Celeste Blundell-Camden

Most teachers are aware that Readers Theatre is some form of 'reading theatre'. These days when we want information, we not only go to our 'physical libraries', but also to our 'cyber libraries'. When we type in Readers Theatre as a 'Google' search, a whole range of sites confronts us. Readers Theatre is literally at our fingertips. How is it then that many schools don't have regular classes of Readers Theatre, or in fact, any classes? Is it the time factor, or is it that we just want to stay with our tried and tested 'assessment' pieces? Besides this, is it too difficult to work out how we are to 'assess' the various components associated with Readers Theatre, especially in the language modes of speaking and listening?

To aid us in assessing Readers Theatre, we now have the 2007 Department of Education and Training (DET) Western Australian ESL/ESD Progress Maps. Whether you are assessing early childhood, middle childhood, or early adolescence, the Progress Map Overview is on page 9 and 10 of each Progress Map. This is the best place to start. You will then get a clearer understanding of the students who could get the most out of participating in this form of group storytelling (Readers Theatre). These students would be those who are achieving at ESL/ESD Level 4 and above. Students achieving at this level are able to read, comprehend and respond to simple texts in script format ('text organisation' Reading & Viewing (RV) 4.3) and are 'aware of salient politeness conventions and act appropriately' (Speaking (S) 4.2).

As an example of how a student might be assessed at say Level 4, you can start the assessment process as soon as he/she arrives on 'stage' to set up for the 'performance'. If students are not 'performing', but only rehearsing for 'performance', then assessment follows mostly similar guidelines. One might ask: Does the stu-

dent enter the room quietly and settle quickly (S4.2)? Does the student listen to the instructions given by the teacher either before 'performance' or within a rehearsal/practice situation (L4.1)? Is the student beginning to talk confidently in a different range of contexts ('entering into expanded interactions' (S4.1)? Is the student beginning to listen attentively in a wide range of contexts (responding 'appropriately to different contexts and registers' L4.2)? When in rehearsal mode and when reading/discussing the Readers Theatre scripts, does the student show understanding of the main points (RV4.1; S4.1)? Is the student beginning to adapt what he/she says to the needs of the listener (RV4.2), varying the use of vocabulary and the level of detail (S4.4)?

Also, because the student is working and achieving in Level 4 or above, he/she is less dependent on 'face to face communication' (Listening (L) 4.1) and is therefore able to understand and use 'offstage' or 'fixed focus'. When using 'offstage' or 'fixed focus', readers do not face each other when 'reading', but focus on fixed points above the heads of the audience. As they speak to different characters in the play, they change their 'fixed' or 'offstage' focus, as if they were looking directly at each character. Using 'fixed' or 'offstage' focus is really only a momentary activity, as the student must then quickly glance back at the script, in order to respond to another 'reader' in the play.

The whole point of being involved in Readers Theatre is that it is 'reading' theatre (no memorising of lines is needed), and is a very convenient way of assessing students in all the four language modes. It is also not difficult to put on a 'performance' of Readers Theatre. Costumes and 'props' are few, movement is minimal and there are no entrances and exits. Players sit and stand, or stand facing the... — cont pg. 10

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audience when 'reading' and then turn their backs on the audience when silent. The voice is crucial in Readers Theatre, as this 'speaking tool' should convey the meaning to the audience in the most expressive way possible. This is the reason, why 'readers' hold the script below the chin line, so that the script does not muffle the words spoken. Also, by holding the script correctly, 'readers' can then respond without hesitation, thereby maintaining the rhythm and pace of the play. 'Reading' and 'responding' can then be both efficient and effective.

If appropriate Readers Theatre plays cannot be found, then adapting stories or parts of novels is an exciting way for students to be involved with Readers Theatre, from the written script to the spoken word. A piece of writing that is mostly dialogue should be found and changed to a Readers Theatre script by taking out the 'he said'/'she said' and other comments that would hinder progressive dialogue. A little narrative may be kept and a 'narrator' could read this out. The script is thus quite simple and the student will have created a 'straightforward' text (W4.1) using a 'suitable layout' (W4.2), according to the conventions of script writing.

Readers Theatre is a fun activity that can involve all the language modes, encourages students to read confidently and fluently and is not an onerous task to assess. The various components of Readers Theatre can comfortably be

assessed, with the aide of the DET Western Australian Progress Maps, as they state concisely what is required at each level. As Readers Theatre and 'repetition' go hand in hand, students can be given repeated opportunities to 'practise pronunciation of unfamiliar words' (S4.4) and to 'monitor' their 'own language learning' (W4.4). With continued practise, students will not only 'use intonation and stress to create effect' (S5.4), when reading scripts out aloud, but will also learn to 'communicate more effectively' (S6.4) in SAE.

Biography

Celeste Blundell-Camden is a teacher who first taught Readers Theatre as a Young People's Specialist Librarian in 1990. She then went on to establish the first Readers Theatre Clubs in Public Libraries in Western Australia. Following the success of Readers Theatre in Public Libraries, she brought Readers Theatre to students in primary, high school and Intensive English Centre Classes. For further information about Readers Theatre or to make bookings for Celeste's classes, contact Celeste at: Readerrama Readers Theatre, PO Box 3111, Joondalup WA 6027 or Phone (08) 9301 0657.☉

The photograph below shows Celeste conducting a Readers Theatre workshop organised by WATESOL earlier this year.

