

Breaking the barrier - Online Reader's Theatre as a Tool for Language Practice and Literary Reflection

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Abstract

*Studies on implementation of Reader's Theatre in learning English and Literature has indicated that it can improve reading comprehension, also a motivating, engaging and enjoyable approach, especially for reluctant language learners. This research reports an instructor's experience in delivering a literature lesson during the pandemic when teaching and learning were migrated to online medium. As a means to engage with the learners and to increase their understanding on a local play, *Swordfish* and *The Concubine*, Online Reader's Theatre (ORT) was integrated into the learning activities. Armed with Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning and The Community of Inquiry (COI) Model of Online Learning, this study aims to examine whether ORT is able to increase learners' online engagement and comprehension of the play. The findings from the quantitative data have shown that learners find ORT to be encouraging and appealing to sustain their interest in learning literature and helps to engage them with their peers and instructors despite learning the play remotely. The pandemic has become the mechanism that requires instructors to re-design their course delivery, hence more creative, flexible and engaging pedagogical approaches need to be adopted to scaffold learners' ability to grasp new knowledge and to maintain engagement between instructors and learners and learners with their peers within remote or hybrid setting.*

Keywords

engagement, online learning, online Reader's theatre, teaching and learning literature.

1. Introduction

Learning of Literature is said to be challenging. This is perhaps due to the richness and complexities of the literary texts used in classrooms. Novel and short stories are the most common texts adopted in a literature classroom due to its richer descriptive language which many learners find to be helpful. Genre like literary play is least preferred due to its demand for the readers to visualise the scenes of the play with minimal descriptive language use [1]. The arrival of Covid-19 pandemic which greatly has impacted the education sector has encouraged instructors to develop and design alternative assessments and learning activities which are to be done online to replace conventional ones. Online teaching and learning require knowledge of pedagogical content when designing and organising distinctive learning experiences and creating conducive learning environments [2]. Technology becomes an instrumental tool to minimise the disruption impact to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic.

The experience of learning the selected literary play is disrupted during online learning due to the lack of instructor's physical presence to provide immediate feedback and guidance when necessary. To help learners to engage with the chosen literary play and increase their participation during online class, pandemic or online Reader's theatre (ORT) approach is adopted as part of learning activities and assessment. Conventionally, Reader's theatre is used to improve learners' reading fluency via the component of literature in an ESL class [3]- [6]. Apart from functioning as a tool to improve pronunciation, intonation, and theatrical recital, Reader's Theatre is also an invaluable interventive

strategy to engage with reluctant or shy learners which helps them to participate interactively as well as improve literary skills [7]-[10]. In general, this study is conducted to examine the effectiveness of Online Reader's Theatre to improve literary comprehension and to investigate the students' perception on the integration of ORT as a means to support online engagement.

2. Brief Literature Review

Reader's Theatre is a distinctive approach and a storytelling device which combines "repetitive reading, clear and precise pronunciation, and theatrical expression" [11]. It is able to stimulate learners' imagination and promote the practice of proficiency language skills and motivation [12, 13]. This study is guided by Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning and The Community of Inquiry (COI) Model of Online Learning. Kolb's Experiential Learning Model supports the notion of learning by doing. This four-phase framework incorporates concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation [14]. Experiential learning, or interactive learning requires students to take a much active role in the learning process in order to optimised their learning [15]. Learning activities like syndicate work, case studies, practical exercises and role plays are some pedagogical approaches that can be integrated to foster active online learning environment [16]. Additionally, this study is further framed by COI which places emphasis on "social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence as essential elements to facilitate successful educational experiences in online distance learning environments" [17]. Within an online learning environment, students are given the autonomy to actively construct and confirm meaning [18, 17]. It is ascertained that meaningful learning occurs when the task design gives focus onto the learners and they are learning by making mistakes and self-inquiry which help them to form meanings and new knowledge by relating the new content their previous past knowledge [19].

4. Methodology

A questionnaire adopted from [20] was distributed to the first-year students from Languages and Cross-cultural communication programme at Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia who took up the subject Language and Literature as an elective course in their second semester. There were 15 male and 20 female students with the age range between 18-22 years old. At the time of this research, classes were still conducted fully online as the Movement Control Order in Malaysia has not been lifted. *Swordfish and The Concubine* written by a Malaysian playwright, Kee Thuan Chye was studied as the material for staging of the Online Reader's Theatre. The play is a re-visioning interpretation of two tales from *Sejarah Melayu; Hikayat Singapura dilanggar Todak* and *Hikayat Demang Lebar Daun*. The play deals with issues related to history manipulation, power abuse, differentiated gender representations, treason and deconstruction of the Malay monarchy. The acts and scenes in the play contain contemporary elements like hip hop and rap music. Findings from the survey were tabulated using SPSS version 23.

5. Findings and Discussion

Table 1 indicates the overall mean score indicated students' positive perception towards online Reader's theatre as a tool for language practice (Mean = 4.0810). The students responded positively that ORT has helped to improve their command of the literary play, visualise the scenes in the play and relate to the characters featured in the play. In addition, Fig. 1 shows the results of the survey on learners' responses to using ORT as a tool for language practice and literary reflection. To ascertain the answer, a seven-question Likert scale survey, with possible responses ranging from 5 - Strongly Disagree to 1- Strongly Agree. The results are illustrated in Figure 1. Higher scores signal greater overall learners' agreement with each statement. Learners' responses were positive for item 2 until 6 with an average of 55% from them agreed that the pedagogical approach of ORT has helped them to engage and comprehend the literary text and communication with their peers with much ease. Their affluent adaptation to the approach is most

likely due to their generation's inclination as digital natives, thus they have greater ability to cope with online learning [2]. For item 1, 46% agree that ORT has helped the students to relate to the characters in the literary text. Their understanding on the characters featured in the play is imperative not only to prepare them for the online staging of Reader's theatre but also to demonstrate their critical analysis of the play. In addition, through the re-enactment of the characters, learners can understand the literary text further as they established connections by immersing themselves into the characters [21, 22].

Reader's Theatre is designed with the intention to help learners to reflect on life through the themes and characterisation featured in the play as well as to sustain their interest in learning literature [21]. In addition, the integration of ORT initiates a rewarding and nurturing learning journey as learners are engaged in creative and fun learning activity while learning literature [9]. Based on the findings, this study which was framed within the Experiential Learning Model and COI models, showed positive response from the students towards the use of ORT in increasing their comprehension of the literary play. These learning models have provided multiple benefits to learners: gaining new knowledge and experience and establishing presence within conducive and positive online learning setting. Apart from that, the teaching and learning of literature to generation of digital natives who have been argued to have limited interest in reading has to be further re-thought and re-designed. Teaching and learning embed with technologies can help each lesson to be enjoyable and meaningful [23] as well as fostering autonomous learning and collaborative learning among learners within the online realm [24].

TABLE 1: Means and standard deviations of students' perceptions on the effectiveness of online Reader's Theatre to improve literary comprehension (N=35).

	Statement	Mean	S.D
1.	Online Reader's Theatre help me to understand the literary text easily.	4.2857	.62174
2.	Online Reader's Theatre helps me to visualise the scenes in the literary text easily.	4.1429	.67612
3.	Online Reader's Theatre helps me to relate to the characters in the literary text easily.	3.9429	.75035
4.	Online Reader's Theatre help me to remember the events in the literary texts easily.	4.1429	.66358
5.	Online Reader's Theatre has improved my confidence to communicate with my peers.	3.9429	.80772
6.	Online Reader's Theatre is a useful tool to improve students' comprehension of the literary text.	4.0286	.65134
	Total	4.0810	.53987

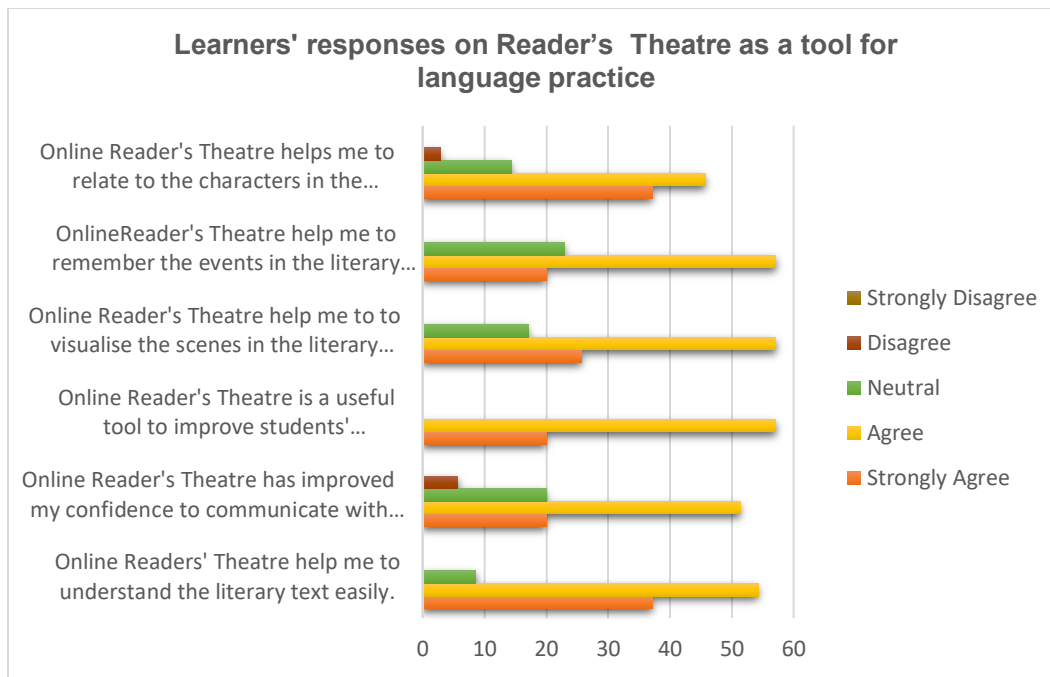


Fig. 1. Percentages of learners' responses on Reader's Theatre as a tool for Language practice

6. Conclusion and Implication of Study

This study has shown that the reformulation of Reader's Theatre using online platform has been well-perceived by the students. It is a useful tool that not only can help students to comprehend and cope with the literary text, also it is an effective pedagogical approach which can help learners to engage meaningfully with their peers and instructor despite being confined in a remote learning environment. The post-pandemic era serves as a catalyst for instructors to explore and experiment with creative alternatives in designing effective learning environment with embedded online technologies. Instructors need to continuously re-examine their own teaching ideologies and keep themselves updated on effective pedagogical methods and instructional design through professional development preparedness training as the future of teaching and learning becomes more flexible and fluid.

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