The Effect of Readers Theater on EFL Seventh-Graders’ Reading and Listening Comprehension

Chih-Cheng Lo¹, Hsifu Wen¹ and Yi-Shuang Lin²

Abstract
While the effect of Readers Theater (RT) on English oral reading fluency has been extensively investigated, research on the effect of RT on adolescents’ English reading and listening comprehension was scant and yielded different results. This research aimed to explore how RT instruction influenced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, especially adolescents, in English reading and listening comprehension. This article conducted a 10-week quasi-experimental design involving two intact classes of 68 seventh-grade students from central Taiwan. The instruments included pretests and posttests of English reading and listening comprehension and nine students were interviewed for an in-depth analysis. The results revealed that the experimental group statistically significantly outperformed the control group on reading comprehension, but not on listening comprehension. Consequently, despite the advantages of RT instruction on reading comprehension stated in the article, interaction among learners in terms of listening comprehension is needed to be emphasized in the course when adopting the RT instruction.

Keywords
Readers Theater, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, English as a Foreign Language; EFL, reading fluency

Introduction
Most literacy educators consider oral reading fluency to be a critical component in reading development and comprehension (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2010; Rasinski, 2019). While studies have shown that good comprehenders read words faster than those who were not (Paige, 2011; Paige et al., 2014), prosody, an indicator of fluency, has been shown to be associated with measures of silent-reading comprehension and overall reading achievement at the primary grades (Paige et al., 2012; Paige & Magpuri-Lavell, 2017). In addition, oral reading instead of silent reading can also develop speaking skills and stimulate learners’ conversational performance. Through oral reading, students develop in both fluency and accuracy of expression in their speaking (Mart, 2012; Young & Rasinski, 2018). Based on the aforementioned, the best reading materials to promote fluency and spoken English are dramas, plays, and dialogues containing authentic texts.

Readers Theater (RT) is probably a way to inspire students to cooperate with each other and thus reduces the psychological burden for beginning English readers (Mart, 2012; Monteiro, 2013; Young & Ortlieb, 2018). Learners are provided with the opportunity to find sentences and phrases used in our daily conversation in dramas, plays, and dialogues (Mart, 2012). Just like the Paired Reading Program in Monteiro’s (2013) study, more competent readers helped less competent ones. With the assistance of peers, students may gain more successful experiences and foster self-acceptance (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2010). In addition, Rasinski (2012) offered an advice on how reading can be made more authentic and integral to the formal education. It originated from the notion of performance for an audience. Rasinski (2012) asserted that actors, singers, poetry readers, and other performers had a natural reason to rehearse or engage in repeated readings for the performance itself. That is why the new instructional strategy, RT, emerged in language learning. Therefore, RT is one kind of easily adaptable theater-based strategies, which provides students with opportunities to hear and see readers like actors speak and react to the narrative, and thus helps students understand the text (Young & Rasinski, 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2019). Consequently, this article attempts to examine whether RT activities enhance students’ English ability, especially the reading and listening skills in a peer-assisted cooperative learning context.

¹National Changhua University of Education, Taiwan
²ChangTai Junior High School, Changhua City, Taiwan

Corresponding Author:
Chih-Cheng Lo, Department of Industrial Education and Technology, College of Technology, National Changhua University of Education, No. 2 Shida Road, Changhua city, 500, Taiwan.
Email: charleslo@gm.ncue.edu.tw

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After years of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Taiwan, the education policy called for assisting students to enhance their English ability (Ministry of Education, 2011). In the joint exam of the 12-year compulsory education—The Comprehensive Assessment Program for Junior High School Students (CAP), listening was also added in addition to the reading part in the English test. The CAP has put much emphasis on English reading comprehension and the length of the reading passages gets longer, which may increase students’ psychological burden, especially low achievers. In addition, English listening skill has long been ignored in the teaching scene. The reason may be due to its ephemeral nature of the acoustic input and the difficulty in accessing the processes (Vandergrift & Cross, 2017). Just to offer students an English listening comprehension test and give answers is not enough for effective learning. Teachers ought to think of strategies to increase students’ listening ability gradually. To solve the discrepancy between high-score students and low-score ones, educators should put forth useful strategies to motivate students and guide more proficient learners to help struggling ones.

The research seeks to reach the goal of better English reading and listening comprehension by developing oral reading fluency through RT instruction. While fluency has been acknowledged to be crucial in the elementary grades, research on the nature and role of fluency for adolescents, especially those who struggle in reading, is limited but needed (Paige et al., 2014; Paige et al., 2012). Particularly, Vandergrift and Cross (2017) thought research about the second language (L2) listening for EFL learners was important because a better understanding of the process would inform pedagogy. To date, however, few empirical studies have been conducted in an EFL environment to investigate the effect of RT on English reading and listening comprehension. Consequently, the research aims to clarify how profoundly RT affect adolescents’ reading and listening comprehension in an EFL context about which previous studies yielded different results. The major research question is proposed: Does RT significantly affect EFL students’ English reading and listening comprehension?

**Readers Theater and Language Ability**

RT has become an instructional strategy to improve fluency with students selecting or creating the script, reading the script repeatedly as well as performing it at last (Garrett & O’Connor, 2010; Mraz et al., 2013). According to Mraz et al. (2013), RT is an interpretive activity in which readers use their voices to bring characters to life. RT differs from conventional theater and other kinds of performances in that readers just read in an expressive way without the demand for sets, costumes, props, actions, or memorized lines (Garrett & O’Connor, 2010).

With RT, students can put their thoughts into the script by inventing characters, scenes, and stories. Consequently, students present the invented dialogue with expressive voices or appropriate actions and gestures. RT should be implemented over the course of 3 to 4 days, while demanding at least 10 to 15 min of instruction, practice, or rereading time within each mini lesson (Garrett & O’Connor, 2010; Mraz et al., 2013). Simply put, teachers just need to assign roles to students in groups for rehearsal beforehand and then have them stand in a straight line in front of the classroom facing the audience with the script in hand when it is their time to present their performance.

RT is an effective instructional method which combines storytelling and dramatic elements. RT incorporates the four main elements of language learning (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and provides a communicative and authentic context for students to use language (Tsou, 2011). Paige and Magpuri-Lavell (2017) recommended that secondary school students could adapt and transform narrative and informational texts drawn from content-area courses into scripts. This learning process of transformation leads to a good conduit for practicing writing and fostering comprehension. Besides writing, DiSalle and Rasinski (2017) found that short-term intense fluency instruction in the classroom improved students’ reading fluency. Students practice repeatedly until they get a certain extent of reading comprehension. Similarly, Rasinski (2019) claimed the psychology of students who received instruction and feedback from teachers or peers were more likely to develop reading fluency. The repeated interaction between teachers and students as well as the interaction among peers enables students to be aware of fluent reading (Garrett & O’Connor, 2010). Therefore, the nearly authentic dialogue not only promotes students’ reading fluency but gives them an opportunity to practice speaking properly through interaction with each other in a sociolinguistic circumstance.

Nevertheless, among the four language skills, listening is seldom discussed in the previous studies about RT. An abundance of studies, mostly from studies conducted in elementary schools, have demonstrated that reading fluency can be improved considerably with RT instruction (Mraz et al., 2013; Young & Rasinski, 2018). For example, Young and Rasinski (2018) found that those who participated in RT gained more word recognition than those who engaged in more traditional reading activities. But, Vandergrift and Cross (2017) emphasized that listening could not be ignored for it was often perceived by language learners as the most difficult language skill to learn and thus caused anxiety for L2 learners. In this regard, when appropriate scripts are not used to be adopted for beginning readers, the anxiety of students while listening may be increased.

Previous studies used to investigate the relationship between fluency and comprehension, which is fairly complex and still under research (Zimmerman et al., 2019). Quite a few studies were conducted to explore the effect of RT on reading comprehension. Especially, previous studies (Caudill-Hansen, 2009; Keehn et al., 2008) found that with a
quasi-experimental design, there were no significant differences on reading comprehension between the RT group and the control group, while Kariuki and Rhymer (2012) indicated that the comprehension scores for the students in the RT group were significantly higher than those in the control group. The research results from Kariuki and Rhymer (2012) probably proved the findings from Rasinski (2014) that a high correlation existed between fluency and comprehension since RT might have impact on fluency.

In addition, RT has been recommended as an instruction for improving oral fluency (Mraz et al., 2013; Young & Rasinski, 2018). As readers’ oral prosody improves, their comprehension also gets better (Paige et al., 2012). However, a student’s level of decoding accuracy may be based on the condition of his/her overall rate of word recognition (Young & Rasinski, 2018). This is because too fast reading does not indicate good comprehension. Similarly, in terms of reading comprehension, Peng and Peng (2010) and Tsou (2011) concluded the identical findings with those of Keehn et al. (2008) and Caudill-Hansen (2009) that no significant differences in reading comprehension between the RT group and the control group were found. Accordingly, the impact of RT on reading comprehension may be different in EFL contexts. In light of the discussions above, future research about the effect of RT on reading and listening performance in EFL contexts is necessary.

To sum up, this main research question in the article is to investigate whether RT exerts a positive influence on reading comprehension and listening comprehension through oral reading fluency training.

**Method**

The study conducted a quasi-experimental design including an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group received RT instruction on four outside reading scripts while the control group had the same materials for individual outside reading without RT activities. RT instruction served as the independent variable. Dependent variables were English reading comprehension and English listening comprehension.

In addition, qualitative data were excerpted from the survey sheets of students’ reflections on RT instruction and interview transcripts to triangulate the quantitative data and to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of students’ perspectives toward the RT instruction and the sustaining effect on their English learning. Five open-ended questions were put forth for students to describe their feelings. Furthermore, these five open-ended questions were used for interviews with students. To elaborate the results, students in the RT group were coded like SA1, SB1, and SC1 according to their English achievement levels—Level A, Level B, and Level C. Each group involved three students and was interviewed for 15 min. Nine of them chosen for the interview were SA4, SA5, SA6, SB12, SB16, SB18, SC3, SC4, and SC5, based on the five questions in the survey sheet (See Figure 1 for the procedure of research design). All interviews were conducted in Mandarin and translated by the researcher while writing the report.

**Participants**

The subjects in the main study were chosen from the same public junior high school located in the downtown area of Changhua City in Taiwan. Founded in 2001, the school comprises three grades with each grade including 21 classes on average now. Intact classes is an already-formed group in the school and entire classes are assigned to the experiment. There are about 34 students in every class, and students are divided into classes based on normal class grouping. The approximate number of students enrolled in the 2014 school year is 750.

The participants were from two intact seventh-grade classes with a mix-ability grouping, not randomly assigned to the experimental group (the RT group) and the control group. There were 34 students in each class with a total of 68 students. In the experimental group, 19 of the students were male and 15 were female while there were 18 boys and 16 girls in the control group. The average age of these students was 13.5.

English is learned as a foreign language at school. The demographic statistics of all the participants’ English learning background are demonstrated in Table 1. Most of them (66.18%) started to learn English at least from the third grade in elementary school as mandated by the Ministry of Education (2011), although some of them (33.82%) started earlier in kindergarten. None of them spoke English as their native language. They were all indigenous Taiwanese speaking Mandarin or Min Nan dialect. Few of them (about 9%) had immigrant parents, mostly from Mainland China and Vietnam. During the experiment, they attended four normal English classes and one extended supplementary class per week with each period lasting for 45 min. Around 63.24% of the participants went to cram schools for extensive English learning.

Students’ English levels were classified into three categories according to the Twelve-Year Compulsory Education in Taiwan. On students’ report cards, with English scores of all seventh-graders serving as the benchmark, the English level of students whose grades were above the percentile rank 80 was categorized as “Upper-intermediate,” marked as Level A. If students’ grades fell between the 20 percentile and the 80 percentile, their English level would belong to “intermediate” marked as Level B. The third level was “pre-intermediate” marked as Level C when students’ grades fell below the percentile rank 20. In the present study, students at the level A were perceived as high achievers, those at the level C as low achievers, and the rest as average. Based on the final English exam in the previous semester, the comparison of students’ English levels between both groups is shown in Table 2.
Experimental Design Procedure

The experiment took 16 periods spread over 10 weeks, including 8 weeks for four outside reading passages/scripts which took up 12 periods and 2 weeks for both the experimental group and the control group to take the pretests and posttests which took up four periods. The duration of each period was 45 min. Prior to the experiment, a pilot study was conducted within 2 weeks. In addition, the researcher interviewed and surveyed students’ perceptions toward RT instruction during lunch break in the last week of the experiment.

The procedures of the experimental teaching are shown in the four stages consisting of the preparation stage, the pre-intervention stage, the intervention stage, and the post-intervention stage sequentially. The procedures are described in detail below.

**The preparation stage (pilot study).** To verify the appropriateness of the instruments, a pilot study was conducted before the formal experiment. Four intact seventh-grade classes consisting of 133 students from the same junior high school in the main study participated in the pilot study.

The class containing 32 students took the reading and listening comprehension pretests and posttests at school, taking up one period for each test. The students listened to each passage before answering the reading comprehension questions just like the participants of the main study would do. Inappropriate questions were deleted based on the results.

**The pre-intervention stage.** First, a background questionnaire was distributed to obtain information on the participants’ English learning baseline and milieu. Second, all the participants took the pretest of reading comprehension in the co-curricular activities class and the pretests of listening comprehension in the blank curriculum class of the school timetable on the same day. The results of the reading and listening pretests served as the covariates to make sure both groups were equivalent in reading and listening proficiency prior to the experiment.

**The intervention stage.** In this stage, the scripts adapted from four reading passages were passed out to the RT group while the original reading passages were distributed to the control group. Each script or reading passage was scheduled to be completed within three periods in 2 weeks.

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**Figure 1.** The procedures of the research design.
Note. RT = Readers Theater.
For the RT group, the first period and the third period of each script instruction took place in the English class on Monday while the second period of each script instruction was executed in the co-curricular activities class on Thursday during the experiment. Students could also take the scripts home for review. In the first period of each script, the teacher guided the students to listen to and read the script orally, followed by the introduction of important words and phrases. The main idea of the reading material was explained likewise. However, compared with the RT group, the students took the material home for outside reading individually for 2 weeks without any RT activities afterward.

The post-intervention stage. First, for qualitative analysis, a survey sheet related to reflections on the RT instruction was filled out by all the students in the experimental group after the 12-period RT intervention. For an in-depth analysis, the researcher chose three groups of students at the English achievement Level A, Level B, and Level C, respectively, for interview. Each group involved three students and was interviewed for 15 min.

Second, all the participants took the posttests of reading comprehension and listening comprehension with questions different from those in the pretests in the co-curricular activities class and the blank curriculum class on Thursday. In sum, the timeline of the experimental design for both the RT group and the control group is shown in Table 3.

### Teaching Materials

The materials adopted for the RT and the control group were basically the same four reading passages comprising It’s a...
Bat, Not a Bird, I’m Not a Bad Guy, What a Great Life, and Cats Are Stuck-Up from Lesson 21 to Lesson 24 of the book, Animals and Tales 1, published by Her Sheng Culture Enterprise Corporation. The book was selected as the reading material for all seventh-grade students in the school of the study by 18 English teachers in the English teaching research meeting held at the beginning of this semester.

The passages of Animals and Tales 1 were suitable for students because they met the criteria of readability proposed by Lai Bob (2005). Readability has long been an issue and it is usually determined by two linguistic factors: word length and sentences (Lai Bob, 2005). Lai Bob (2005) chose five reading passages from the BCT English tests to analyze the readability of English articles and found that the length of most articles was between 100 and 200 words. In this regard, the length of the four passages for the present study ranged from 100 to 200 words.

Given the conversational characteristics of RT scripts, one of our researchers who also as an English teacher in the class adapted and recorded two of the four passages titled It’s a Bat, Not a Bird and I’m Not a Bad Guy of a narrative type into Script 1(Supplemental Appendix B) and Script 2 (Supplemental Appendix C) of a dialogic type. The other two passages titled What a Great Life and Cats Are Stuck-Up were adapted into Script 3 (Supplemental Appendix D) and Script 4 (Supplemental Appendix E). They were originally in a dialogic style, so the researcher just added more interesting lines to make them dramatic. Moreover, narrators, repetition of important words and sentences, and lines for all performers to read together were designed. The length of adapted scripts was approximately 1.5 times that of the original passages at most conforming to the suggestion from Tsou (2011). For comparison, the original reading passages were individual outside reading materials for the control group.

RT instruction in the experimental group was designed based on the core English competence indicators from the Ministry of Education in Taiwan. The learning objectives were categorized in the cognitive domain, the affective domain, and the psychomotor domain.

### Teaching Procedure

Before the RT instruction, students were divided into six heterogeneous groups with five to six members in each group. There were four scripts adopted as mentioned earlier, It’s a Bat, Not a Bird, I’m Not a Bad Guy, What a Great Life, and Cats Are Stuck-Up, instructed from the easiest to the most difficult. Each script took up three periods of instruction. The sample lesson plans of Script 1 can be seen in Supplemental Appendix F.1 Taking the procedures proposed by Mraz et al. (2013) as the reference, the general teaching process went through as follows:

**RT script introduction with shared, coral, and partner reading.** First, the teacher distributed scripts to every student. Second, the teacher guided the students to listen to and appreciate the expressive reading of the script with the RT CD, followed by the teacher’s modeled reading with appropriate speed, volume, and intonation (shared reading). Third, important words and phrases were introduced. Fourth, all the students read simultaneously by imitating how the teacher
read (choral reading). Finally, they took turns reading the parts of the script within groups (partner reading).

Assignment and rehearsal parts. Parts were assigned to individual students through group discussion. Poorer or less confident students could start reading from lines marked All. Afterward, students highlighted their own lines and rehearsed with group members until they read fluently. Finally, the way to present the script on stage was discussed. The teacher took field notes during this session.

Performance and evaluation. Six groups performed the script one by one. The merits and drawbacks of each group were discussed and noted down on RT evaluation forms (Supplemental Appendix G) distributed to each group. After all the six RT performances, RT cooperative project evaluation forms (Supplemental Appendix H) were passed out to all the students for reflection on the process of group cooperation and personal involvement. The teacher videotaped all the performances for later analysis.

The Reliability and Validity of Each Test

To ensure the reliability and validity of each test, a preliminary analysis of the quantitative instruments was carried out through a pilot study. Three experienced English teachers teaching over 10 years at the school of the study helped examine the phrasing and suitability of all the tests and questionnaires before responded by the participants of the pilot study. Except the background questionnaire, the formation of questionnaires before respondents by the participants of the pilot study. Except the background questionnaire, the formation of each instrument and the results of the pilot study are described, respectively, as follows.

Reading comprehension test

The reading pretest. The descriptive information of the final reading comprehension pretest and posttest is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. The Reading Comprehension Pretest and Posttest.

| Content           | Pretest      | Posttest     |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Source            | L11 to L14 of Animals and Tales 1 | L21 to L24 of Animals and Tales 1 |
| Item number       | 20           | 20           |
| Difficulty index  | .591         | .575         |
| Cronbach's alpha  | .851         | .872         |
| of all items      |              |              |
| Total score       | 100          | 100          |

The purpose of the reading comprehension pretest (Supplemental Appendix I) was to guarantee the identical reading proficiency of the RT group and the control group before the formal experiment. It consisted of four passages, *The Kangaroo, As Busy as a Beaver, Ask My Mother, and I Love Giraffe Necks*, from Lesson 11 to Lesson 14 of the book *Animals and Tales 1* mentioned earlier. In the book, there were five multiple-choice questions regarding the content in each reading passage. All told, four passages with 20 comprehension questions were tested in the pretest. Each item accounted for 5 points. The total score was 100 points.

To examine the appropriateness of the test, the reliability was checked and an item analysis was executed. The results showed the test provided a strong reliability of Cronbach’s alpha of .851, indicating a good test to reserve. Furthermore, the difficulty of each item was all above .3 (from .375 to .813) and the overall average was .591, indicating moderate difficulty (Supplemental Appendix J).

The reading posttest. The reading comprehension posttest (Supplemental Appendix K) aimed to explore the extent to which participants had comprehended the four outside reading passages or scripts distributed to both groups, selected from Lesson 21 to Lesson 24 of the book *Animals and Tales 1*. There were also five multiple-choice comprehension questions regarding each passage with a total of 20 questions. Similar to the reading pretest, the reading posttest contained questions about literal ideas with few questions on inference.

The reading posttest was considered reliable for it reached Cronbach’s alpha of .872. In addition, since the test displayed the average item difficulty of .575 (from .357 to .813), which didn’t require any modification (Supplemental Appendix L) (see Note 1).

Listening comprehension test. The descriptive information of the final listening comprehension test is organized in Table 5. We analyzed and compared the data through pretest and posttest as follows.

The listening pretest. The purpose of the listening comprehension pretest (Supplemental Appendix M) was to ensure the identical listening proficiency of the RT group and the control group before the intervention. The pretest comprised Part I and Part II. Questions of Part I were adopted from Lesson 15 of the book *Animals and Tales 1* and were related to the usage of words and sentences in the four passages of the reading comprehension pretest.

Part I included three sections containing five multiple-choice questions in each: (1) To choose the corresponding picture according to the question; (2) to choose the correct response to the listening question; (3) to identify the correct answer after listening to a conversation. Therefore, there were 15 questions tested in the pilot study.

Part II was vocabulary listening. The researcher designed this part to test whether students were familiar with the vocabulary listed in the word bank of the reading pretest passages. The purpose was to make sure the RT group and the control group had the same level of familiarity with the sounds and meanings of the new vocabulary before the experiment.
Ten words, including bone, tourist season, stream, stone, pouch, huge, serious, intelligent, cruel, and flat, were chosen from the word bank below each passage of the pretest by the researcher and then checked by three other experienced English teachers to ensure a balanced number of words with different length. The test required students to write down the Chinese meaning of each word right after they listened to the teacher pronounce it one by one.

To sum up, the results of the pilot study were illustrated in terms of Part I and Part II, respectively. First, the results of Part I showed internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha of .735. All told, there were 14 questions with each question of 5 points in Part I. The overall score of Part I was 70 points. Second, the results of vocabulary listening in Part II showed that the average number of the 10 words comprehended by students and written down in Chinese correctly was only .81, indicating students were not familiar with the sounds and meanings of the outside reading vocabulary listed in the word bank without specific instruction. Each word answered correctly accounted for 1 point. Students got 10 points at most in Part II. In sum, the total score of Part I and Part II added up to 80 points.

Concerning Part II of vocabulary listening, the average number of the 10 words written down in Chinese correctly after listening among the students in the pilot study was only 1.72, symbolizing the unfamiliarity with the vocabulary listed below the four reading passages. As for the scoring method, the posttest was counted the same as the listening pretest.

### Results and Analysis

The major findings regarding the research questions were organized in this section. The major research question is to explore what RT significantly affect EFL students’ English reading and listening comprehension. This section discusses the result and analysis with two sections. The first section addresses the issue about the effect of RT on English reading comprehension. The second section presents the findings and analysis of the effect of RT on English listening comprehension.

#### The Effect of RT on English Reading Comprehension

Research Question is firstly to examine the effect of RT on EFL students’ reading comprehension by determining whether there are significant differences in English reading comprehension between the RT group and the control group. To compare both groups, the descriptive statistics of the reading comprehension pretest and posttest are shown in Table 6, and the data were processed through one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

First, before operating ANCOVA, a test of homogeneity of within-group regression using the pretest as a covariate was conducted to ensure there was no violation of the assumptions of homogeneity of variance. As presented in Table 7, the pretest was not found to be a significant predictor of the posttest score ($p = .314$), indicating the equivalence of both groups on the pretest.

Second, ANCOVA was conducted and the results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in English

### Table 5. The Listening Comprehension Pretest and Posttest.

| Content                          | Pretest | Posttest | Source          | Part I | L15 of Animals and Tales I (related to content from L11 to L14) | Part I | L25 of Animals and Tales I (related to content from L21 to L24) | Part II | Vocabulary listening (from L11 to L14) | Part II | Vocabulary listening (from L21 to L24) |
|----------------------------------|---------|----------|----------------|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------|
| Source                           | Part I  | L15 of Animals and Tales I (related to content from L11 to L14) | Part I | L25 of Animals and Tales I (related to content from L21 to L24) | Part II | Vocabulary listening (from L11 to L14) | Part II | Vocabulary listening (from L21 to L24) |
| Item number                      | Part I  | 14       | Part I | 14       | Part II | 10       | Part II | 10       |
| Cronbach’s alpha of all items    | .735    | .917     | .701  | .167     |
| Total score                      | Part I  | 70       | Part I | 70       | Part II | 10       | Part II | 10       |
reading comprehension between the RT group and the control group, $F(1, 65) = 5.356, p < .05$, as presented in Table 8. Besides, the relationship between the pretest and posttest reached a medium effect size with a partial eta squared value of .076.

Twenty-five of the students in the RT group expressed RT activities did assist in English reading comprehension through repeated reading and the enactment of the characters in the final performance. This process led to great improvements in reading comprehension as confirmed by the qualitative data that the RT group outperformed the control group in reading comprehension tests. Nevertheless, seven of the students thought RT did not contribute to English reading comprehension partly because some words and sentence structures were too difficult to understand. In general, most students agreed with the positive effect of RT on reading comprehension exemplified by the following remarks.

Yes. I looked up new words first, and then tried to comprehend the story plots for the final performance. I got more familiar with the story after reading it several times. (SA5)

Yes. It made English reading a little bit easier. Because of oral reading on stage, I understood the reading passage more. However, I still couldn’t understand the meanings of some words and sentences by reading them, even though I could listen to comprehend them. (SCS)

Yes. It made English reading a little bit easier. Because of oral reading on stage, I understood the reading passage more. However, I still couldn’t understand the meanings of some words and sentences by reading them, even though I could listen to comprehend them. (SCS)

The results were in line with Kariuki and Rhymer’s (2012) findings that reading comprehension could be attributed to RT-based instruction. In addition, the results lent some credence to the possibility proposed by Rasinski (2019) that oral fluency led to improved comprehension. As discussed in literature review, reading fluency may be improved through RT activities, which further leads to better understanding of passages.

### The Effect of RT on English Listening Comprehension

The study also investigated whether significant differences exist in English listening comprehension between the RT group and the control group in response to Research Question: does RT significantly affect EFL students’ English listening comprehension? To compare both groups, the descriptive statistics of the listening comprehension pretest and posttest are shown in Table 9.

First of all, a test of homogeneity of within-group regression indicated that both groups were equivalent in listening ability prior to the intervention as shown in Table 10 ($p = .110$ in Listening Part I, $p = .462$ in Listening Part II, and $p = .154$ in Listening Total).

Through ANCOVA, the results showed that there was no statistically significant difference in English listening comprehension between the RT group and the control group, $F(1, 65) = 1.470, p = .230$, as presented in Table 11. In addition, the effect size (partial $\eta^2 = .022$) was rated small. In terms of the subtests, both groups did not differ significantly in Listening Part I, $F(1, 65) = .008, p = .929$, while the performance in Listening Part II (vocabulary listening) was found to be statistically significant ($p = .000$) (see Table 11).

While listening as a whole was not influenced remarkably after the RT intervention, the inquiry into vocabulary listening revealed a different situation. The findings of vocabulary listening echoed those found by Keehn et al. (2008) that the RT group nearly doubled the vocabulary acquisition of the control group.

It must be noted that, in terms of the whole class, most students thought RT was conducive to English listening and speaking. Of note was the finding that 20 of them mentioned RT assisted in listening ability despite the absence of statistically significant results about listening comprehension when compared with the control group. The excerpted description of students’ opinions were as follows:

Yes. Listening and speaking. I didn’t experience such activities in elementary school. We used to learn English with textbooks instead of outside reading materials. In this way, I could learn, listen, and comprehend many words and sentences. It’s interesting. You had to listen to comprehend and converse with others. I learned to speak English because group members rehearsed many times before performing on stage. (SB12)

Twenty-five of the students would practice the script after class. They focused mostly on the pronunciation of difficult
vocabulary and the prosody of sentences. The result may explain why the RT group was superior to the control group in the vocabulary listening subtest. In a word, most students at different English proficiency levels affirmed RT was beneficial to English reading and listening. Most importantly, learning motivation was ignited by cooperative learning in RT activities.

The major findings summed up below concern the effect of RT on English reading comprehension and English listening comprehension. First, RT did affect EFL adolescents’ English reading comprehension significantly. Comprehension may result from repeated reading and continuous rehearsal which subsequently contribute to oral reading fluency, just as Young and Rasinski’s (2018) assertion that the doubled mean reading rate as a result of RT provided students the ability and opportunity to read better. Another explanation for good comprehension was students’ involvement in attempting to become the characters and realize their feelings for the final performance on stage. The discussion initiated by group members about how to interpret the characters orally helped students explore deeper meanings of the story. Nevertheless, as evidenced by students’ reflections on RT instruction, difficult sentence structures hindered their comprehension. It seemed RT might not help students conquer grammatical problems. To sum up, this research enable us to illustrate how adolescent EFL learners improve gradually both in English reading and listening ability by putting forward a motivation-driven teaching approach for those who are concerned with adolescents’ English learning.

### Conclusion

This article has shown that reading fluency is a critical and decisive factor for reading comprehension. Reading fluency is an issue that should go beyond the elementary grades because reading prosody, a central feature of fluency, has been found relevant to silent-reading comprehension for secondary students. In addition, a considerable number of

| Table 9. Descriptive Statistics of English Listening Comprehension Pretest and Posttest. |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Group           | n               | Source    | M        | SD       | M        | SD       |
| The control group | 34              | Listening Part I | 52.79 | 16.886 | 54.85 | 13.113 |
|                 |                 | Listening Part II | 2.62  | 1.826  | 3.44  | 3.314  |
|                 |                 | Listening Total | 55.41 | 18.176 | 58.29 | 15.600 |
| The RT group    | 34              | Listening Part I | 52.21 | 15.628 | 54.71 | 15.809 |
|                 |                 | Listening Part II | 2.62  | 1.826  | 6.03  | 2.736  |
|                 |                 | Listening Total | 54.24 | 16.806 | 60.74 | 17.619 |

Note. RT = Readers Theater.

| Table 10. Test of Homogeneity of Within-Group Regression on English Listening Comprehension. |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Source                                       | Sum of Squares  | df       | Mean Square | F        | Sig. |
| Listening Part I                             | Group × Part I Pretest | 274.689 | 1        | 274.689 | 2.621 | .110 |
|                                               | Error           | 6,706.229 | 64      | 104.785 |
| Listening Part II                            | Group × Part II Pretest | 2.635 | 1        | 2.635 | 0.549 | .462 |
|                                               | Error           | 307.338 | 64      | 4.802  |
| Listening Total                              | Group × Total Pretest | 253.995 | 64      | 253.995 | 2.081 | .154 |
|                                               | Error           | 7,811.784 | 64     | 122.059 |

| Table 11. Summary of ANCOVA for English Listening Comprehension. |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Source                                       | Sum of Squares  | df       | Mean Square | F        | Sig. | Partial η² |
| Listening Part I                             | Group × Part I Pretest | 0.851 | 1        | 0.851 | 0.008 | .929 | .000 |
|                                               | Error           | 6,980.918 | 65      | 107.399 |
| Listening Part II                            | Group × Part II Pretest | 178.279 | 1       | 178.279 | 37.384 | .000 | .365 |
|                                               | Error           | 309.973 | 65      | 4.769  |
| Listening Total                              | Group × Total Pretest | 182.359 | 1       | 182.359 | 1.470 | .230 | .022 |
|                                               | Error           | 8,065.778 | 65     | 124.089 |

Note. ANCOVA = analysis of covariance.
students have prosody levels well below expectations and a few studies of fluency have been conducted on adolescent readers (Paige et al., 2012). What’s worse, for reading instruction, teachers usually make students read texts silently and then take a quiz on the texts without offering any intriguing approaches to truly engage with the texts (Kariuki & Rhymer, 2012). Consequently, this article highlights mainly on the fluency factor to trigger better reading comprehension with a teaching strategy of RT.

Struggling readers often encounter difficulties in recognizing words, expressive reading, and listening. Their frustration and disinterest in reading mount as the grade increases because reading assignments get harder (Rasinski, 2012). As a teacher as well as a researcher, I also found that these students rejected to listen carefully due to lack of confidence. Students often expressed, “No matter how hard I try to listen, I just can’t understand it.” The adolescent period is a time when students face many important junctures regarding reading and academic achievement (Paige, 2011). Particularly, although this article has shown that many students commented their listening ability was improved after the RT activities, RT did not affect EFL adolescents’ English listening comprehension significantly. One possible reason is good listening comprehension requires multiple listening strategies and cannot be developed over a short period of time. Vongpumivitch (2007) noted listening was a complex process involving many variables such as note-taking skills, cognitive styles, and memory capacity, and that perfect mastery of vocabulary was not necessary to achieve an understanding of the listening passage. Similarly, Yeldham and Gruba (2014) indicates that an interactive second language listening need an instructional approach. In this regard, background knowledge of learners should also be taken into consideration.

Several pedagogical suggestions may be suggested from this study. First, the gap between English high achievers and low achievers might be bridged by applying the RT instruction characteristic in terms of mutual help between high achievers and low achievers. Second, the field experiment has demonstrated RT can be practically implemented to help improve students’ ability of reading long English passages, which is of great importance to prepare for the CAP. Third, students, even those who detest English, can gain more confidence in English listening and speaking through RT activities. They are more likely to use English in interactive-settings. In sum, RT shed light on effective and motivational language pedagogy.

Despite the advantages of RT instruction stated in the study, some limitations need to be cautioned. At first, all data were from one junior high school and the target samples were only two intact classes from the same grade. Thus, the generalization of the results to other populations with different educational backgrounds in other geographic locations may be limited. In addition, as expressed by students in the survey, practice for RT scripts was not enough due to limited experimental time. Third, the reading and listening comprehension tests in the study were not standardized assessments, but only related to the content in the scripts. Different findings may be obtained from standardized assessments such as the general English proficiency test (GEPT). Finally, the anxiety for performance need to be taken into consideration in terms of learning motivation for it is a possible factor associating reading and listening performance.

In spite of the encouraging results of this study as to the positive effect of RT on English learning, future research is required in the following directions to address relevant problems unresolved. First, EFL students’ listening ability was not easily enhanced through RT as Zimmerman et al. (2019) mentioned, many factors were associated with fluency development. Future researchers could consider variables like students’ cognitive styles to analyze the effect of Readers on English listening comprehension. Second, the RT performance may lead to anxiety about English learning resulting in unwillingness to interact with group members. Therefore, future researchers could further explore the impact of performance of anxiety or the willingness to communicate on English achievement when adopting the RT instruction.

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ORCID iD
Chih-Cheng Lo https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5306-8805

Note
1. Copies of the instructions provided to the two treatment groups are available on Supplemental Appendices (A–P) and request from the corresponding author.

Supplemental Material
Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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