

Reader's Theater as a Reading Strategy: One Perspective A Beginner's Guide

By Karen Rowan



There's this focus that, once it becomes intense, leads to a sense of ecstasy, a sense of clarity: you know exactly what you want to do from one moment to the other; you get immediate feedback. You know that what you need to do is possible to do, even though difficult, and sense of time disappears, you forget yourself, you feel part of something larger and once the conditions are present, what you are doing becomes worth doing for its own sake. Flow – Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow?language=en

Why do Reader's Theater?

I was teaching a Spanish class in South Bend, Indiana Memorial BrainWorks, a division of Memorial Hospital focused on brain health. They asked if they could hook me up to a portable machine that measures brain waves while I was teaching. There is an optimal state that people reach when involved in a pleasurable activity like playing the piano or reading a good book or eating chocolate. This is a measurable state that Csikszentmihalyi calls *flow*. (Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row)

I am in flow while teaching Spanish. I am in a state of perfect contentment, happiness and bliss ... while teaching.

My goal, though, is for my students to join me in that state. They should forget they are listening to a different language. They should not perceive it as work, but rather as a pleasurable experience. Stephen Krashen says that "language acquisition is effortless and involuntary." The brain craves more exposure to things that put it in flow, so my students naturally, unconsciously are driven by their brains to seek out more comprehensible input in Spanish. They do that because it feels good.

Why Reader's Theater Instead of Decoding and Translating?

This is not a state that can be arrived at through decoding, which is what Wilhelm in *You Gotta Be the Book* (Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. (2008). *You gotta be the book: teaching engaged and reflective reading with adolescents*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press) says we spend most of our time on. We teach students to decode words, to sound them out, to figure them out. That's not *flow*. *Flow* creates imagery. We want students to see pictures in their heads. We want them to create mental imagery around what characters look like and what scenery looks like. We want to bring words to life.

What would it take to get students to forget that they are reading in another language?

When I see a movie based on a book, my first thought is often that the way I imagined the character is not consistent with the appearance of the actor. This is because I can see pictures in my head. I visualize the story as I am reading it. This is a habit my students often do not have. They focus too much on the words and not enough on the images. This very often makes reading an unpleasant chore for them.

Rather than decoding or translating or reading to decipher, Reader's Theater, acting out reading selections, is an alternative that brings my students into *flow* with me. My goals are for my students to experience reading as pleasurable, so that they will want to continue to read independently and for them to see pictures in their heads.

Choosing a Reader's Theater Selection

This article focuses specifically on books that I have written for four reasons: First, I eliminate copyright issues associated with using selections and translations from sections of readers. Second, because I am most familiar with these books and have taught them, specifically, more than most other people. Third, because either I or a student in my classes has videotaped short segments of my classes, giving me video to rely on, study and share. Fourth, because I primarily teach adults instead of children, I did not have to concern myself with parental permission slips and can easily use the videos.

However, Reader's Theater can be done well with many readers. My first exposure to Reader's Theater was at a National TPRS Conference in Naperville, Illinois in which Blaine Ray read *Casi se muere* while Jason Fritze and Joe Neilson were the actors. Successful Reader's Theater depends a lot on choosing the chapters that naturally lend themselves to being acted out.

Here are some sources for readers:

www.fluencyfast.com

www.CPLI.net

www.miracanion.com

www.sabineundmichael.com

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www.1goodstory.net

www.tprsforchinese.blogspot.com/2016/01/the-great-mandarin-reading-project.html

www.tprstorytelling.com

www.blaineraytptrs.com

Useable scenes contain exciting or interesting action and motion, involve more than one character and often involves dialogue. When no dialogue is present, it can often be invented. What would he say? What would she say?

Reader's Theater isn't limited to readers, though. Any story with a plot, even the lyrics to a song, can be acted out.

Props and Setting

Choose props that help students to visualize the scenario. They can be realistic or ridiculous. A hat can serve as a steering wheel while someone is driving. Feathered boas, children's toys, hats, Halloween costumes and even cardboard boxes can be used to make acted-out reading selections easier to visualize.

Set the stage so that imaginary locations are stationary. The house is on the right. The park is on the left. Maintain those locations throughout acting out the story. Cars must move to another location. People must open car doors before getting out. This makes the action easier to visualize for those watching.

The Process

Pre-teach the new vocabulary through Total Physical Response, TPR Storytelling® or Ashley Hastings' Movietalk. Each new vocabulary word or structure should be presented in context multiple times. I pay particular attention to high frequency vocabulary. I want the reading selection to be entirely comprehensible before we even begin reading.

- Choose student actors to dramatize the roles.
- Bring them to the front of the room.
- Actors and students in the room are holding and reading the readers.
- Provide the actors with costumes and props, whenever possible.
- Begin reading out loud in the target language while coaching the actors to dramatize the action.
- Stop to ensure 100% comprehension by both the students in the class and the actors. (What does "wind" mean? / ¿Qué quiere decir "viento"?)
- If pre-taught words are still not entirely comprehended in the moment, it is okay to write them up on the board in both languages.
- Encourage actors to act enthusiastically and dramatically.
- Coach and direct actors who perform unenthusiastically until they do it with energy.
- Insist that actors follow the directions as you read precisely, so that each sentence is completely comprehensible to students. If the actors do not understand the input, they won't be able to act in a way that makes the input comprehensible to the rest of the class.

Here is an example of Reader's Theater using Chapter 3 of *Las aventuras de Isabela*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nL0ntezkLqE>

Setting:

Isabela and her mother enter a church in Mexico to take pictures. Mom warns Isabela not to touch anything with her hands. She follows these instructions literally.

Script for the selection in English:

I also touch all of the statues. I don't touch the statues with my hands. I touch the statues with my feet. I touch the statues with my head. I touch the statues with my belly button. I want to touch the statues with my tongue. But my mom looks at me. My mom is not happy. She says to me, "Isabela, why can't you look and touch like a normal little girl."
"I am not normal. I am famous. It's obvious."

The actor on the left is playing the part of the statue, so he stands on a chair to make him higher than "Isabela", the actress. The third actress plays the part of Isabela's mother.

Look for these things:

How actors are coached / directed

How dialogue is handled

How comprehension checks are conducted throughout

How actors are supported and their success is guaranteed

How questions are asked of the actors and the class

Repetition of vocabulary and sentences

The objective is to make the selection comprehensible, but also to make it compelling so that students will pay attention and be entertained. If the actors are doing a good job of this, the class will occasionally be laughing. Ideally, all of my students are having such a good time, that they are forgetting that this is in an unfamiliar language.

Comprehension check

0:52 Yo quiero tocar... What's *quiero* ? Class: wants.

Coaching / Directing

1:08 Yo quiero tocar las estatuas con mi lengua. (Hand on shoulder) Mira. Mira. Mira.

(Look. Look. Look. Coaching "Isabela" to look at her mom before saying the next line)

"Pero mi mamá me mira." (My mom looks at me.)

(In English to the "mom") Let's see your best mom look. Mira.

(In English...) Okay, like this.... Yo quiero tocar la estatua con mi lengua pero mi mamá me mira.



Actors are coached in their body language and their enthusiasm and their position on the stage.

Comprehension check

1:45 What's *está contenta*?

Questions:

La mamá está contenta o no está contenta? ¿Por qué no está contenta? (The mom is happy or unhappy? Why isn't she happy?)

Coaching / Directing:

2:45 Showing the mom how she would whisper because she is in a church.

Coaching actors. Handling dialogue. Guaranteeing success.

Mom starts to speak and nothing comes out. I say her line for her. Then we do it again. Notice how dialogue is directed. Students who are unable to or do not want to speak, don't have to. (We do not force output beyond the level of acquisition.) I turn her shoulders to face the crowd. I speak the words. She mouths the words.



Comprehension check

3:33 What's *puede*?

Question to class

¿Por qué no puede mirar y tocar como una niña normal?

Ali: Es especial.

Coaching / Directing

3:57 Isabela le dice... (Isabela says) “Yo no soy normal.” No, como Isabela. (No, like Isabela.)

Isabela says it again. Coaching again to not be a whisper.

Isabela says it again.

Con emoción. (Say it with emotion!)

Interacting with the class / Positive Feedback

4:42 (Before giving the statue a high five) ¿Se mueve o no? (Asking the class if the statue had moved or laughed.)

4:50 ¡Un aplauso! (An applause!)

All the World's a Stage

When we finish Reader's Theater, I'm not even halfway done, and we are not yet ready to really read independently. The actors so far have had a vastly different experience than the rest of the class. When we are physically engaged with the language, we remember the language for longer. There is memory in muscle. Just as, according to Dr. James Asher, TPR helps students retain vocabulary, being actively involved in acting out a story deepens physical and tactile memory, as well. I want the entire class to act out the story. However, the class would be long and boring if every student acted in front of the class. The “All the World's a Stage” technique allows each student to participate actively.



I break the students into groups of three. Each person in the group plays a role. One is the statue. One is Isabela. One is the mother. The entire room acts the scene out simultaneously while holding their books. Every third student is standing on a chair.



I walk around the room reading aloud dramatically while the students act out the scene they have just seen acted out in front of the class.



- Mark Mallaney also filmed himself teaching the same chapter using Reader's Theater.

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ha-6_JsSFWs

- Here is another example of "All the World's a Stage":

- Isabela captura un Congo*

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4i8Vpi5XGk>

- This example of "All the World's a Stage" was done with a song.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRx308Hf6xc>

- This song, and others from Gale Mackey, are available from www.blaineraytpers.com. I also found this independently created Lego Youtube video set to the song.

- El cuento del gato* (Gale Mackey, lego video / All the world's a stage)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjVGBPGkaAw>

Reading

We're ready to read! By this point every word has been pre-taught. The selection has been acted out once in front of the class as I have done comprehension checks and asked questions. Then the students acted out the story themselves in small groups while I read the story again.

Now students will read.



They will ask each other if there is a word they don't understand. If between the two of them they don't understand they can ask me or write it on the board in the target language and I will define it in our common language. This particular class included a group of participants whose first language was Turkish. When they discussed amongst themselves, they used Turkish, not English.



Their first semi-independent reading should be a successful experience for them. They should feel proud and pleased that they are understanding the reading and it is not difficult.

This is what pleasure reading feels like. This is *flow*.

Adding Advanced Skills

For a discussion of advanced skills, I will switch books. *Don Quijote: el último caballero*, is a better book for expanding upon some previously mentioned strategies and adding new ones. Chapter 3 is translated into English and printed with permission on the final page of this article. There are a lot of additional resources to use with this book and THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING, VOL. 11, ISSUE 1, MAY 2016; WWW.IJFLT.COM © 2016 KAREN ROWAN

it has fight scenes, death scenes, and declarations of love that are even more interesting to act out. Because it is in the present and past tenses, it is easier to teach in a multi-level class, as well. I add a number of specific additional strategies while referring to Don Quijote. However, Reader's Theater can be used with most readers or any short story, song, or poem with a plot.

1. Assign a class photographer or videographer for each Reader's Theater section so that you can watch it later and have another opportunity to provide CI, using the video or still photos as a Movietalk or Picture Talk (Coxon, M. (2014). Talking Our Way to Successful Reading. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching* 10(1): 33-37.)
2. Music. Don Quixote has the added advantage of having a musical soundtrack. (*Man of la Mancha*, the musical, is in English, Spanish, and French.) Before I begin, I teach only the part of the song in which Don Quixote and Sancho Panza introduce themselves. I divide the class in half. I ask for student volunteers to be the conductor. One student "conducts" Sancho Panza. Another "conducts" the other side of the room, Don Quixote. I play the part of the song in which Don Quixote sings "Yo soy yo, Don Quijote." That half of the class sings along. Then I play the part in which Sancho says, "Soy Sancho, si Soy Sancho." Both of these lines are written on the corresponding side of the room. I point to the posters while the student conductors lead their side of the room. We do this many times while I encourage and coach students to sing more loudly and with more emotion or to stand while singing. Then, every time I say "Don Quijote" or "Sancho Panza" during reader's theater, that side of the room has to stand and sing. The actors in the Reader's Theater performance become the conductors of their respective choirs. (Note: "Quixote" in English. "Quijote" in Spanish.) (Yo Soy Yo <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoBtQglAbsE>)
3. Props for the Windmill chapter. Stick horses. Metal shaving basin for Don Quijote's hat. Rubber swords. "Knight" clothing, made from cardboard. Two people to play the part of the windmill. A sturdy chair.
4. Coaching the stationary objects. The two people who play the part of the windmill will keep their arms moving opposite each other throughout the duration of the performance. This will make it impossible for them to read along. Pay special attention to comprehension checks with these actors.
5. Coaching Don Quijote and Sancho Panza: Really encourage the actors to over-act. Coach inflection and energy and body position and maintaining space. Actors often face each other rather than the audience. Coach them to play to the audience and to act for the laugh. They must do precisely what I say when I say it -- not sooner or later -- so that what I am saying is comprehensible to the class. I often move them by touching their shoulders to point them the right way.
6. Dialogue: These lines can be said multiple times. Have the actors say them slowly. Then romantically. Then violently. Then quickly. Then with surprise! Then from their knees. Have them sing the line. Sing it like an opera singer.

Sing it like a cat. Rap it. You will also say the line each time the actor does. Remember that I say the dialogue and it doesn't matter how well the student says that same dialogue. Take your time, as long as you are in the target language. If a student is unwilling to play along, stand just behind his head and say the lines for him while he mouths the words.

7. Rewind, fast forward, pause, slow motion. Re-do portions of the action in reverse. Then tell it forward again. Then reverse slow motion. The actors slow their actions to match your very slow reading. Have them pause in the middle of a motion and freeze. Then ask the class questions about what is happening while they are frozen. This allows for a lot more comprehensible input and a lot more repetitions of high frequency vocabulary while keeping the action fresh and compelling for the class. Don Quijote attacks the windmill, he is raised in the air and then falls to the ground and then Sancho helps him up. Stop. Rewind. Sancho UN-helps him up. He UN-falls. He UN-gets raised in the air. He UN-attacks the windmill. Stop. Fast forward in slow motion. Don Quijote attacks the windmill. He gets raised in the air. Stop. Rewind fast. Often when a character does not have a line, I might ask the class what he is thinking or what he might want to say.

The teacher is the one who determines the placement of those directions -- not the students, because the timing is important. Remember that your goal is to make reading fun and memorable and to make pictures in their heads. It's also to give them lots and lots and lots of comprehensible input.

8. Pause after each time you say "Sancho Panza" or "Don Quijote" so that the choirs have a chance to interrupt by singing.

Here is a video of several of these advanced skills being incorporated and presented by Jason Fritze at the International Forum on Language Teaching (IFLT).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI_IH_feHmk

Other Activities

1. Very often, easy readers skip over a plot point that will seem to the students to be missing. We brainstorm what could have happened and what the characters would have said in the "Missing Chapter" and then act that chapter out while making it up on the spot.

2. Ashley Hastings' Movietalk. This chapter is also available in a cartoon version. Ask questions and narrate while viewing the clip.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lDIYlc-V5I>

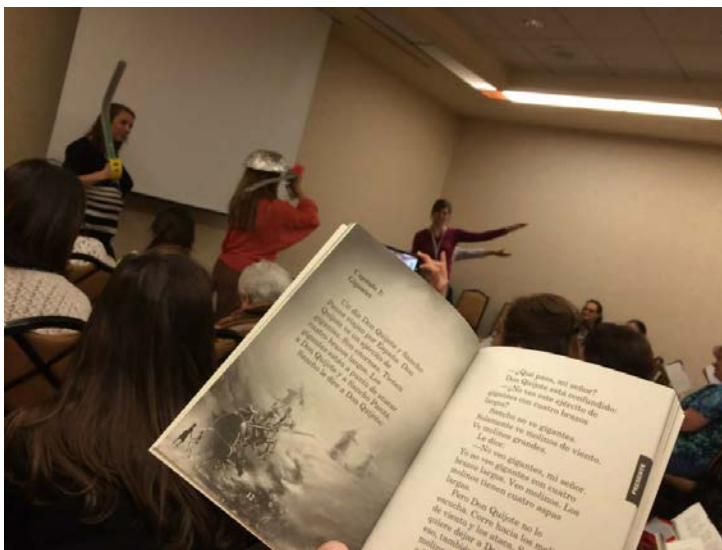
Flow

Reader's Theater is one of many ways to bring reading off the page, creating rich images and colorful pictures in the minds of the readers. Battling boredom and fostering an environment of joy and laughter with reading, we can accomplish our primary goal of creating pleasure readers, who will seek out more opportunities to read for pleasure in the target language if they find the experience enjoyable.

There are many ways to perform Reader's Theater and many different strategies and techniques. Variations that accomplish the same goals of providing ample comprehensible input in the target language and fostering an environment of play in order to create pleasure readers, are equally legitimate and should be explored. Remember that we are trying to get our students into *FLOW* so that reading activates that pleasure center of the brain.

Karen Rowan attended her first TPRS Workshop in 1995. She has taught high school, middle school, elementary school, college and adults, at both public and private schools, domestically and internationally since 1995. She was the director of the National TPRS Conference for 5 years and created the first TPRS Coaching workshops. She is the author of the TPRS ancillaries for *Realidades* and *Paso a paso*, as well as the *Isabela* series of readers (*Las aventuras de Isabela / Les aventures d'Isabelle; Isabela captura un congo / Isabelle capture un singe hurleur; Carl no quiere ir a México*), and *Don Quijote, el último caballero* as well as several yet-to-be published books. She has also been the editor of *IJFLT* (ijflt.org) since 2005.

She is available for school district in-services on teaching with Comprehensible Input, TPRS, TPR, reading strategies and creating CI programs. She teaches Spanish to adults as a full-time teacher for Fluency Fast Language Classes.



*Don Quijote, el ultimo caballero, Excerpt, English translation,
Chapter 3: Giants by Karen Rowan, Published by Command Performance Language
Institute, www.CPLI.net*

One day Don Quixote and Sancho Panza were traveling through Spain. Don Quixote saw an army of giants. They were enormous. They had four long arms. The giants were about to attack Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Sancho said to Don Quixote,

“What’s wrong, Sir?”

Don Quixote was confused.

“Don’t you see that army of giants with four long arms?”

Sancho didn’t see giants. He only saw windmills. He saw big windmills.

He said to him:

“I don’t see giants, Sir. I don’t see big giants with four long arms. I see windmills. The windmills have four long blades.”

But Don Quixote didn’t listen to him. He ran toward the windmills and attacked them.

Sancho didn’t want to leave Don Quixote, so he also ran toward the windmills. A blade hit Don Quixote and raised him in the air.

When he fell to the ground, Sancho helped him to get up. Don Quixote looked at the giants again. He admitted that now the giants were windmills. He said to Sancho that the giants were enchanted and they all of a sudden changed from giants into windmills.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9h6albLqrU0&feature=youtu.be>

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