



Perception of teachers on readers' theatre and reading comprehension: Prospects for curriculum planning

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Abstract

Reading has always been a challenging task especially for struggling learners of English as a second language (ESL). Readers' theatre has been used as a class instruction approach to enable learners to become innovative and active participants in the reading class. During class instruction, teachers use multiple strategies such as modeling reading accuracy, main idea instruction, group reading, adapting scripts, and discussion. Using a qualitative approach, this study aimed at investigating the perception of secondary school teachers on the impact of readers' theatre for improvement of reading comprehension of learners of ESL. Data was collected using interviews from eight teachers of English in secondary schools in Kisumu County, Kenya, and lessons were also observed. Purposive sampling was used to select the teachers. The findings were reported verbatim in accordance with the themes of the study. The findings revealed that readers' theatre class activities enabled learners to be involved actively in-class reading tasks which resulted in enhanced reading comprehension. Furthermore, learners built confidence in reading due to group reading. The findings of this study will assist teachers to plan appropriate class activities that scaffold reading comprehension and build confidence among learners. The study suggests further studies on implementing readers' theatre on writing skills.

Keywords: curriculum planning; ESL; readers' theatre; reading comprehension; struggling readers

1. Introduction

Teachers play a significant role in developing learners' cognitive skills for improved reading comprehension. The need to produce learners who are proficient in reading depends on the teaching approach the teacher implements in the classroom. Proficiency in reading fluency is demonstrated when learners are comfortable while reading aloud with a proper expression almost close to a normal speaking pace. Rasinski, Stokes, and Young (2017) reported that teachers should be involved directly in the effective implementation of readers' theatre in class for improved word recognition skills, fluency, and comprehension. In the same line of thought, Lekwilai (2014) reported that oral reading

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fluency is significant for learners to become effective readers because it strongly correlates with reading comprehension. Therefore, building oral reading fluency and word decoding skills should be considered during planning activities for effective class instruction.

Bensaad and Ouahmiche (2020) writing on awareness of reading strategies among Algerian students asserted that teachers should employ activities that are fruitful and interesting for learners to realize better results. Readers' theatre provides learners with explicit multiple activities during reading instruction when learners adapt scripts and present them without necessarily memorizing the lines in the scripts. Since the main reason for reading is to comprehend information; the role of a teacher is to enable learners to extract information from the class text by employing strategies appropriate to the learners' needs and level to help them comprehend information. Karabag (2015) opined that successful implementation of readers' theatre during class instruction depends on a sensible selection of reading materials as well as effective planning by the teacher. However, Mansouri and Darani (2016) observed that classrooms were dominated by teachers who follow the same monotonous routine leaving learners less motivated. On the other hand, readers' theatre being theatrical in nature enables learners to use voice expression while performing adapted scripts to relive the voice of characters. Consequently, learners view reading as entertaining when they bring characters in the text alive through performance. According to Mansouri and Darani (2016), readers' theatre scripts stimulate learners' thoughts and past experiences, enabling them to read the script in an interpretive manner that involves both the cognitive and affective domains. Involving these two domains make learners active resulting in a learner-centered classroom.

During readers' theatre class reading, teachers model fluency for accuracy in word recognition skills. Rasinski and Samuels (2011) distinguish fluency to comprise of the following elements: automaticity (ability to recognize words automatically), pace, and prosody (expressiveness). Rehearsals were done in preparation for readers' theatre performance to promote repeated reading. Since the teacher is responsive in the learning process, assessment of reading fluency is quick and addressed during such class rehearsals. According to Young and Rasinski (2017), learners should be exposed to repeated reading when practicing readers' theatre script to build reading fluency. During these practices such as read aloud and repeated reading, learners become more proficient and as result build confidence in reading. Young and Rasinski (2011) observed that the reading modeling provided by teachers during readers' theatre class activities on proper phrasing and expressiveness developed fluency among learners. Furthermore, Yılmaz, Babür and Haznedar (2020) revealed that phonological awareness contributed significantly to the development of reading skills of second-grade pupils. Thus, accuracy in word reading will enable learners to decode words in the text with minimal errors in pronunciation.

Reading fluency in learners is determined by how words are grouped together in meaningful phrases making reading sound effortless. This is demonstrated by good expression when reading aloud (Garrett & O'Connor, 2010). In addition, elements of reading fluency cannot be dealt with in a classroom setting without recognizing the learner's ability to decode and understand text information (Basaran, 2013). A learner who has difficulty in reading words is slow in reading resulting in phases of frustration. Subsequently, the author's intended meaning may be distorted due to mispronunciation. Therefore, for learners to arrive at comprehension, words should be decoded accurately and grouped into meaningful phrases. Learners need to practice pausing appropriately at punctuation marks in order to make meaning of what is read. For this reason, teachers modeling reading accuracy and frequent rehearsals enable learners to observe phrasal markers in sentences enabling them to read without experiencing any difficulty.

Readers' theatre provides learners with opportunities to engage in the varied reading of a text in authentic settings when learners adapt scripts. The scripts should be of appropriate length from class-

level texts. Kulo, Odundo and Kibui (2019) observed that adapting scripts from class texts enabled learners to engage in deep interaction of content resulting in incomprehension. When learners adapt scripts from the text, they first identify the main ideas and characters involved in the context being discussed. Learners also are able to understand and utilize varied text structures when changing prose to direct speech. Concerning this, Tsou (2011) found significant differences in most aspects in understanding sentence structure for effective writing. Young and Ortlieb (2018) described how teachers can implement readers' theatre during class reading instruction. The researchers suggested a five-day format that clearly targets reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. In the program, learners engage in varied activities that focus on developing different areas of reading and also preparation for an oral performance of adapted scripts. These multiple activities engage learners throughout the reading process enabling the development of reading fluency at the same time comprehension of text information.

1.1 Related Studies

Mansouri and Darani (2016) conducted a study on the effect of readers' theatre on oral proficiency and lexical knowledge among Iranian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). A sample of 90 female intermediate learners participated in the study. An oral ability test and vocabulary knowledge test were administered as both pretest and posttest. The experimental group was exposed to readers' theatre, but the control group was subjected to normal class learning. The study found that experimental groups performed better than control groups on lexical knowledge and had improvements of fluency attributed to the treatment of readers theatre. Similarly, Young and Rasinski (2017) examined the effects of readers' theatre on grade two learners. The participants comprised of 70, seven to eight-year-olds who were randomly assigned to treatment and comparison groups. The study found that treatment of readers' theatre granted more results on word recognition and prosody.

In a mixed-method approach, (Tsou, 2011) investigated the effect of readers' theatre to enhance EFL on pupil's reading and writing proficiency. The findings in the study revealed that the treatment group performed better than the control in reading fluency and accuracy but not in reading comprehension. On the other hand, Aghaei, Koo, Noor, and Rajabi (2014) conducted a remedial reading course in critical literacy using theatre reading for post-graduate students' English language education. The findings of the case study showed that implementing theatre reading promoted critical reading both in and out of class. On the other hand, unlike Tsou who engaged EFL learners, and Aghaei et al. (2014) who involved post-graduate students, it was necessary to employ theatre reading on ESL higher intermediate to enhance reading ability.

Kabilian and Kamaruddin (2010) reported that readers' theatre significantly improved learners' understanding of text material and increased their motivation and interest to learn literature. Having that the study involved 20 unmotivated learners indicates that reading practices should be planned with learner's needs and ability in mind to enable them to enjoy the reading process. Similarly, Tsou (2011) findings from the qualitative results revealed that readers' theatre enabled learners set a purpose to participate in class and interact with classmates which made learning enjoyable. In addition, Karabag (2015) in a study to establish opinion of 72 secondary learners on readers' theatre found that the 11th graders after being instructed History lessons using readers' theatre for a period of four weeks enjoyed participating in a group reading. The study by Karabag (2015) used semi structured interviews on learners unlike this study that engaged teachers to give their opinion. Karabag study also exploited use of readers' theatre in other disciplines revealing the impact it has on the understanding of text information.

Keehn, Harmon, and Shoho (2008) investigated the effect of a performance reading in a readers' theatre program with the aim of enhancing reading achievement and motivating learners in grade eight who were struggling with reading. The learners in this study were from a low socio-economic background in a large metropolitan area in south Texas. Using six stories in both intact classrooms, the experimental group read, practiced, and rehearsed scripts which were later performed as readers' theatre scripts of the stories over a period of six weeks while the control group participated in reading activities based on the original versions of the stories. The participants were subjected to both pretest and posttests. In addition, interviews were administered to the treatment group at the end of the study. The results in interviews revealed that participating in readers' theatre was motivating and enabled learners to build confidence. The quantitative results revealed that the treatment group had gained in reading ability, fluency, and vocabulary as opposed to their counterparts in control groups. On the other hand, Nopa, Januarius, Mursid, and Dwi (2019) investigated learners' perception of employing readers' theatre to improve reading comprehension. The study involved 22 learners and teachers assisted them to relate with the stories through writing scripts and also modeled reading. The findings revealed that the learners were able to read at an appropriate speed, utilize correct phrasing, expression, and smoothness. Consequently, learners built reading confidence.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

There is a need for teachers to plan and prepare quality class instruction to enable effective reading outcomes for learners. Implementing strategies that suit learners' needs and interests will address the issue of learners who struggle with reading. Since teachers are part of curriculum planners and directly involved in implementing the policies stipulated in the curriculum design, the study sought to explore teacher's perception of the effectiveness of readers' theatre on reading comprehension of ESL learners in Kenya. In order to achieve this goal, the following question guided the study:

1. What is the teachers' perception of the impact of readers' theatre technique on reading comprehension of secondary school learners of ESL?

2. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the works of Vygotsky (1978) on social interaction. According to Vygotsky (1978), learners should acquire knowledge from teachers or peers who assist in the learning experiences. Teachers need to use explicit strategies to enable learners to acquire knowledge in a friendly class atmosphere. Vygotsky (1978) posits that students understand best through social interaction and therefore teachers being facilitators should provide experiences that scaffold the learning process. Practically, effective learning occurs when learners make connections with personal experiences. Learners are able to interpret information based on these experiences. Hussain (2012) contends that teachers should be in a position to employ constructive learning experiences in class. Teachers in this study had interacted with learners in implementing readers' theatre to assist learners who were still struggling with comprehension. Strategies such as modeling reading accuracy, main idea instruction, group reading, adapting scripts and discussion were considered to scaffold the learning experience.

3. Method

The study used a qualitative design because the researcher was interested in how the participants understood and interpreted their experiences. The study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the impact of readers' theatre on learners' reading comprehension. Therefore, a qualitative design was appropriate to allow teachers to share their perceptions in a descriptive way.

3.1. Participants

The study used purposive sampling and eight secondary school teachers of English participated in the study. Creswell (2009) opined that participants in qualitative studies should be selected purposefully and should be the best source of information required. The teachers selected were from four different schools that had employed readers' theatre for a period of eight weeks to learners who still struggle with reading. The schools were of mixed gender and sub-county day category in the periphery of Kisumu city in Nyanza region in Kenya in a cosmopolitan setting. All the teachers had been trained to teach at the intermediate level and inducted on readers' theatre. The teachers' data is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Teachers of English

Variable	Indicators	Frequency
Gender	Male	3
	Female	5
Professional Qualification	MED	2
	BED	6
Teaching Experience	Over 15 years	3
	11-15 years	2
	6-10 years	1
	Below 5 years	2

3.2. Instruments

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview and classroom observation schedule. The semi-structured interview which was centered on the themes of the study was used to gain insights into teachers' understanding of readers' theatre on learner reading ability in terms of teachers' experiences in class while implementing readers' theatre and effectiveness. The teachers were interviewed once and eight lessons were observed to enhance the reliability of information gathered on readers' theatre class strategies employed in class to enhance comprehension. The constructed interview questions were shared among the supervisor at the University for clarity and validity. The interview questions were then piloted with three teachers who were teaching in the same school category but did not participate in the study to check on ambiguity. From the pilot interviews, revisions were made and questions edited for clarity.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

The semi-structured interviews were conducted after the teachers had implemented an intervention of readers' theatre as a treatment for a period of eight weeks in their respective schools. Before conducting the study, a research permit was obtained from the National Commission of Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). A clearance letter was also given by the County Director of Education (CDE), Kisumu County, and permission to conduct the study was sought from Principals of respective schools. The researcher observed ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity by giving participants codes. The participants agreed to be audiotaped for an estimated period of 30 minutes which was later transcribed verbatim. Themes were obtained from transcribed data and categorized. The researcher also drafted notes and coded them to help understand the

information from the interviewees. The notes from each participant were attached to the themes of the study. The transcribed data and field notes were checked for the study themes (Creswell, 2014). The interviews were conducted in the respective schools of the study and there was provision for probing to arrive at a clear understanding of information. On the other hand, eight lessons were observed and the researcher ticked against activities conducted in class during reading instruction.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research follows a six-step procedure which is: the researcher should transcribe the data, then re-familiarize with the data, first phase code, second phase code, third phase code, and finally produce the report (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). The researcher listened to the tapes several times to transcribe the information and also to have a grasp of the data. Then transcripts were re-read and notes related to the data were added. Data were later coded according to the themes. Themes that looked overlapping were merged to correspond with the research questions. Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) assert that coding and adding notes on data is necessary because themes arising from the data create a detailed descriptive analysis. Data were analyzed and interpreted based on the study themes. The researcher then reported the findings by paraphrasing information from the teachers and reporting a few verbatim reports.

4. Findings and Discussions

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions on the impact of readers' theatre to enhance learners reading comprehension. Eight teachers from mixed-gender day schools teaching higher intermediate learners were interviewed and observed during instruction to gain perceptiveness on the impact of practices employed during reading instruction and also to establish activities employed in class. The themes identified were: main idea instruction, modeling reading, adapting scripts, discussion, and group reading/ performance.

4.1. Main Idea Instruction

The teachers were in unanimous response that main idea instruction enabled learners to understand the main concepts being discussed in the story. All teachers recommended that instruction on the main idea focused on themes discussed in the text enabling learners to focus on the storyline. The findings were confirmed with observations in-class instruction when learners pointed out themes in the text and gave evidence to support the themes. Learners were able to identify main ideas in order to come up with informative scripts. One female Teacher (T) expressed her view in ways that echoed the others:

T5: *Teaching students to identify the main idea in the story helps them know the direction in which the story is moving. Students can effectively identify the theme after only understanding whatever is happening in the story. Whenever we look at themes in the text, the students have to first identify them and provide relevant information from the text to show understanding. This enables students to understand thematic concerns and the flow of events in the text.'*

Effective identification of main ideas in the text indicates that learners are able to arrive at comprehension because they employ critical thinking skills which enable them to piece information in the text together. The teachers believed it was necessary for learners to identify key concepts and topic sentences in paragraphs in order to focus on a storyline and arrive at comprehension. Consequently, identification of the main idea and supporting information helps learners to write summaries of chapters in the text. The findings are in tandem with Karabag (2015) who observed that learners were able to obtain relevant information with ease which reflected an understanding of the text. Similarly,

Solak and Altay (2014) observed significant effects on learners' ability to understand text information after main idea instruction.

4.2. Modeling Reading

Transcribed data revealed that through modeling accuracy in reading, learners were able to develop fluency and accuracy in pronunciation of words for correct prosody in sentences. Modeling proper reading enabled teachers to guide learners to observe punctuation marks while reading for meaning. Modeling gave learners the opportunity to express sentences correctly and read at a pace that relayed meaning to others who were listening to the performance. Teachers were also able to correct learner's errors when they listened to them reading the scripts. This argument is supported by the following sentiments from one male teacher.

T3: *'The challenge we face with the students during reading is lack of fluency which has always affected comprehension. We have those students who are not able to read some words correctly which always interferes with their general understanding of the text. I always correct any errors in mispronunciation of words when the students read the scripts during rehearsals and with time they can pronounce the words correctly.'*

The majority of the teachers equally agreed that modeling reading improved learners reading expression and phrasing words into meaningful phrases for meaning. Appropriate expressions guarantee to understand of text information because learners can verbalize words and sentence units correctly which relays the author's intended meaning. The results were further supported by classroom observation as learners rehearsed scripts while teachers modeled correct phrasing and expression while taking into consideration punctuation marks. Teacher T7 concurred that learners were able to understand information when proper phrasing is observed to express information in the text while reading as reported in the following comment:

T7: *'For students to read fluently, they must know how to vary their voices for meaning. Correct expression helps them to arrive at fluency and relay accurate information of what is being read to the other class members.'*

This argument was further supported by T5, whose views reflected the opinion of other participants:

T5: *'Students are able to arrive at reading fluency if they recognize when and where they are to pause or stop while reading. In this way, they are able to understand what they are reading as compared to one who reads without observing punctuation marks. Like in the case of a sentence being read with the wrong intonation may not convey the meaning effectively to a listener.'*

In general, the teachers revealed that modeling reading motivated learners to participate actively in the reading process because it was a way of scaffolding comprehension. Modeling reading and correcting learners reading errors being a scaffold to reading fluency may as well motivate learners to look forward to the next reading class. Similar findings were found by Lee and Yoon (2017), where learners developed phonological awareness which enhanced reading fluency. Further, Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011) revealed that learners who received regular instruction on grouping words and syntactic forms had minimal errors in reading. Instruction on syntactic forms expedites the processing of information at the sentence level enabling effective comprehension. The findings confirm assertions by Nopa et al. (2019) on learners achieving accuracy in reading with appropriate expression and phrasing after teachers' modelled reading fluency. In essence, learners are able to connect the information in paragraphs when instructed on syntactic forms.

4.3. Adapting Scripts

The information transcribed from interviews revealed that the majority of teachers considered adapting scripts a significant way for learners to be engaged in higher-order thinking processing in order to understand the text. For example, T 4 argued:

T4: *'Students are subjected to read and understand the text in order to come up with a good script. For instance, they should be able to identify the characters in the paragraphs given and rephrase their words for the script without interfering with the meaning conveyed.'*

Specifically, T3 reported that learners were able to utilize contextual cues such as identifying where the major events in the story are expressed to process information in the text. His sentiments were strongly supported by another participant as follows:

T1: *'The students have to be supported in ways of identifying elements of a paragraph like a topic sentence, inferring vocabulary, and clincher sentences in order to distinguish how events develop in the paragraph. Before reading I ask them questions related to what we want to read. This helps them have a clue of what we are about to read and in the process of reading together we brainstorm on areas of difficulty.'*

Furthermore, similar sentiments were held by T2 and T8 who reported that learners were able to manipulate language structures by rephrasing sentences without interfering with meaning in the text. Classroom observations confirmed that learners adapted scripts from sections of texts which were enacted in class. This exercise was observed to be quite engaging in the sense that learners had to understand the information in the text and rephrase the scripts in their own sentence structures without interfering with the author's intended meaning. Furthermore, T6 opined that adapting scripts was very demanding for learners who are still struggling with reading but remarked that besides that it helped learners be engaged actively in the reading process. She reported:

T6: *'I want to believe that learners who are fluent in reading will find adapting scripts from a novel a much easier task compared to those who are still struggling with reading. But still, my observation is that adapting scripts creates room for the students to boost their understanding of text because they interact with the text in order to rewrite the script in their own words.'*

Findings in this study are in tandem with Tsou (2011) who observed that learners were able to write informative scripts because they understood language structures. Ideally, adapting scripts requires learners to have prior rhetoric knowledge for effective comprehension. Knowledge of sentence structures enables learners to develop summarization skills reflecting an effective understanding of the text.

4.4. Discussion

All teachers declared that discussions enabled learners to participate actively in class reading instruction. The majority of the teachers revealed that learners appeared to be in a more relaxed learning atmosphere when engaged in class discussions with peers. This setting portrayed a more lively classroom when learners shared their own interpretation of the text information. In relation to this, teachers need to engage learners in frequent discussions because learners tend to retain more information produced through higher-order thinking processes when the background is activated. For instance, T6 stated as follows:

T6: *'Students bring on board varied views on what they have read. Even the ones who rarely participate in class are always busy engaged in those discussions. I believe they feel relaxed when left to work in groups, rather than if I pick on individuals.'*

Discussions facilitate learners to have a higher degree of comprehending the subject matter. This is because they bring in varied views of the text when they relate their real-life experiences to what they read. It is through discussions that learners can activate prior knowledge for effective comprehension. The teachers' views were supported with lessons observed where learners worked in groups to discuss chapters while adapting scripts. The findings reveal that learners were able to relate their own experiences to information in the text thus facilitating comprehension.

Similar findings were realized by Kabilan and Kamaruddin (2010) as learners were able to visualize information in the text when they related with information in the text. Similarly, Nopa et al. (2019) observed learners increase in comprehension when teachers scaffold reading comprehension by helping them visualize information in the text.

4.5. Group reading

Group reading was highly exploited by teachers because this was a way of enabling learners to achieve automaticity and accuracy while reading aloud. The frequent rehearsal through repeated reading and performance of scripts built reading smoothness and fluency. All teachers were in agreement that performance of adapted scripts through group reading facilitated learners to achieve smoothness and the appropriate reading rate which resulted in relaying meaning to other listeners. Besides, building confidence among learners, group reading was motivational because learners did not have to read a text all by themselves. For example, teacher T3 remarked as follows:

T3: *'Group reading helps learners to self-check and correct on poor pronunciation habits which have always been affecting their reading fluency. This helps them to build confidence in reading because they are not reading a whole paragraph alone.'*

Another teacher commented in the following way:

T5: *'Some of the students shy away from reading to other class members because of the fear of making errors, but group reading has helped the shy ones to build confidence from the frequent rehearsals before the actual performance in class. In fact, a student's understanding of the text is enhanced as they try to fit in the character's role by bringing out the character's feelings and emotions through correct expression.'*

The revelations by teachers indicated that learners were able to verbalize words and convey the intended meaning in the text through group reading. Verbalization of words facilitated learners' understanding of ideas in the texts as expressed by the following teacher:

T2: *'The only way I can know that students have achieved fluency is when they pronounce words accurately. However, this is achieved with a lot of practice and also the teacher has to make corrections when students pronounce words incorrectly.'*

The findings were supported by classroom observations which revealed that learners developed better reading prosody through frequent rehearsals of scripts and consequent performing of scripts which enhanced reading fluency. The findings are a clear indication that learners achieved reading fluency and comprehension by exploring character's emotions and interpreting the intended meaning by the author. Similar findings were observed by Young and Rasinski (2017) who observed that learners improved in word recognition skills and prosody after treatment of readers' theatre.

In addition, several teachers reported that group reading made the classroom activities and learners enjoyed the learning process. When learners are directly engaged in the learning process, they develop an interest in reading which creates a friendly learning atmosphere, and concentration of text materials is enhanced resulting in better results. Furthermore, learners gained confidence which assisted their affective domain during the learning process. The findings corroborate with Jeon and Lee (2013)

whose findings reflected that performing readers' theatre scripts supported learners reading attitude which enhanced the class learning environment. Similarly, Nopa and Leni (2017) found that learners enjoyed participating in group reading which boosted attainment in reading. Furthermore, Nopa et al. (2019) found that learners demonstrated self-confidence while reading aloud to class members. In essence, self-confidence in reading translates to fluent reading resulting in effective comprehension among learners.

Table 2 illustrates the opinion of teachers on activities employed during reading instruction that enhanced reading comprehension among the learners.

Table 2. Opinion of teachers on the effectiveness of reading strategies

Strategy	Teachers' Opinion	
	Frequency	Percentage
Main idea instruction	8	100
Model reading	7	87.5
Adapt Scripts	5	62.5
Discussion	8	100
Group reading	8	100

5. Conclusion

This study examined the perception of teachers on the impact of readers' theatre on the reading comprehension of learners of ESL in Kenya. The study demonstrated a positive effect of employing readers' theatre during reading instruction which adequately enhanced learners reading comprehension. Specifically, the findings revealed that learners developed accuracy in reading for effective comprehension. Learners were also actively involved in-class reading activities which triggered higher-order processing of information when learners visualized and related text information with their own experiences. Besides, many teachers revealed that readers' theatre enabled learners to build confidence in reading because reading was conducted in groups. The findings suggest that teachers should put into consideration planning lessons with readers' theatre class activities in order to enhance learners' reading comprehension. Further research is suggested on implementing readers' theatre on writing skills when learners adapt or create scripts.

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