



## Secondary School Students' Opinions About Readers' Theatre

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**Abstract:** In this article, a teaching strategy which not only blends yesterday and today in a meaningful way but also powerfully integrates literacy and history will be examined. Firstly Readers' Theatre as a technique will be introduced. Secondly, the usage guidelines of Readers' Theatre will be presented. Finally the opinions of secondary school students about Readers' Theatre as an instructional component in history teaching will be discussed. The research was conducted on 72 11th grade students from Deneme Secondary School in Cankaya district in Ankara in the spring term of 2013-2014 school years. For the purpose of the study, students were taught by using Readers' Theatre technique in history lessons for four weeks and at the end of this implementation, the semi-structured interviews were held to determine the opinions of students about Readers' Theatre technique. The themes were formed by making content analyze to the collected data. It is concluded that the students mainly have described Readers' Theatre as "theatre". They have found Readers' Theatre useful in many respects as they outline the positive effect of the technique on their reading and obtaining historical information. They like most the cooperation with their peers and acting. The vast majority of students have not mentioned any dislikes and a few of them have difficulties to follow the script. Finally, the answers of the majority of the students on the implementation of Readers' Theatre again are "positive" and their suggestions for better implementation are "on stage", "the same way" and "using visuals".

**Keywords:** *Instructional Readers' Theatre technique, history teaching, reading, skill*

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### Introduction

It is possible to say that teaching is most effective when it is based on strategies that are characterized by active student involvement (Cornett, 1999:231). This is especially important in the field of history education for it is unlikely that students will learn if they only listen to teacher (Safran, 2002). Whereas, a major goal of history teaching is to develop historical thinking skills (historical empathy, chronological thinking and critical thinking etc.) as well as the content knowledge (Demircioglu, 2000 & 2009; Dilek, 2007; Dinc, 2009; Safran, 2010; Guven et al., 2014). Besides, the grasping of historical concepts and reading comprehension are important acquisitions to understand historical texts. Therefore, it is needed to teach these historical thinking skills and acquisitions by using active methods and techniques. In Turkey, especially after the change of the primary and secondary schools curricula in 2007, it became more important to make students gain these skills with active methods and techniques. In order to teach such these high level skills, it is necessary to use really active methods like creative drama, discussion, field trips, project-based learning, etc. other than traditional ways of teaching. Especially with the changes in primary and secondary education programs in Turkey, acquiring these skills to students with active methods have become more important. In

order to improve students' reading comprehension and historical empathy skills, to learn historical concepts, the Readers' Theatre is one of the unique technique that can be used.

### Readers' Theatre

Readers' Theatre is "a presentation by two or more participants who read from scripts and interpret a literary work in such a way that the audience imaginatively sense characterization, setting, and action. Voice and body tension rather than movement are involved, thus eliminating the need for the many practice sessions that timing and action techniques require in the presentation of a play" (Laughlin & Latrobe, 1990:3). It is "the dramatization of literature using the techniques of oral interpretation" (Fredericks, 2000, p.xx). Barchers (1993) states that the primary focus in Readers' Theatre is on an effective reading of the script rather than on a memorized presentation.

The Readers' Theatre is a storytelling device that stimulates the imagination and promotes all of the language arts. It is an oral interpretation of a piece of literature read in a dramatic style. If it has been used in history lessons, Readers' Theater successfully integrates both the literacy and history teaching aims in a holistic way. Readers' Theater activities enhance

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readiness, creative writing, concept learning, perspective taking, problem solving, decision making while at the same time make students learn the historical knowledge. Readers' Theatre offers students interesting and unique insights into the utility of language and its value in both its printed and oral forms. It boosts listening and speaking skills, enhances creative writing abilities, powers reading development, develops positive self-concepts, and transforms reluctant readers into energized readers. Quite simply, it is history and literature brought to life and life brought to history literature (Fredericks 2009, p.vii).

Flynn (2004) notes that Readers' Theatre is not a new technique, although its inclusion as an instructional strategy in reading is relatively novel. Poems written by Homer and stories from ancient Greek mythology were often told as readers presented them orally and students memorized them in unison (Beck, 1984). Although its format is similar to a play, Readers' Theatre is distinct from acting. The emphasis of Readers' Theatre is placed on the literature, whereas acting places its focus on the actors' interpretation of the literature.

Students are not expected to memorize lines in Readers' Theatre. No attempt is made to hide the scripts that the performers hold in folders or place on lecterns in front of them. Instead, they read from the scripts during the presentation. Lines are distributed among individuals, pairs, small groups, and the whole group. The emphasis is on spoken words and gestures, not on staged action or on stage movement. The focus is on learning about the historical events and bringing those events to life in the classroom. Although students are not creating a dramatic production of the script, the nature of the presentation encourages the development of important skills. The students who read are building their oral presentation skills while the students in the audience build their listening skills. Students are able to explore historical events through a new medium and gain an appreciation for the experiences these women endured (Smith, 2003).

The flexibility of Readers' Theater is such that students of a wide range of age groups and levels of proficiency can benefit from, and enjoy it. The key to the effective use of Readers' Theater lies in a judicious selection of

materials as well as in effective planning by the teacher.

Reading aloud to other people carries a responsibility for the audience. Accepting this responsibility is a two-edged sword, however. Nothing of interest can affect the audience if the readers do not know everything possible behind the words they are reading. Research comes into play with dictionaries, biographies, and histories. Students will begin to read more, on purpose. Also, Readers' Theater has been called "theater of the mind", if the audience participates in interpreting plot, action, character, and setting by visualizing and imagining that which is not directly presented on stage (Sloyer, 1982).

### The Value of Readers' Theatre in History Teaching

While students adapt a script from historical film, poem, novel or any other documents, their understanding of another time period will expand. To interpret a character effectively, the reader must be familiar with the setting and the reason why the scene to be presented conveys a particular emotion. This need to understand gives the participant new insight into history. Many historical novels introduce words indicative of the time period or colloquial language no longer commonly used. Thus, both participant and audience become familiar with new words and extend their vocabulary. Effective writing, as well as critical reading, is a common goal in history curriculum. The act of scripting demands a variety of reading and writing skills. After a scene is chosen, the scripter must create the narrator's lines. An introduction is needed to present the characters and to inform the audience of the events that have gone before. Tie-ins must be written so that the narrator can provide needed description, and concluding lines are usually appropriate to further build the audience suspense. Readers' theatre demands that the audience listen carefully to create the setting imaginatively and to justify character responses. This involvement helps children gain new understandings about the past (Dick, 2000). Readers' Theatre has plenty of non-academic benefits, too such as putting on a performance takes creativity, hard work, and important social skills like cooperation and teamwork.

Table 1. The differences of Readers' Theatre from staged theatre

Staged Theatre	Readers' Theatre
Formal and complex	Informal and simple
Memorized script	Script interpretively read aloud
Emphasis on staged action and stage movement	Emphasis on spoken words and gestures
Scenery, costumes and props	Exists in minds of audience only

Source: [www.cal-webs.org/handouts06/ReadersTheater.pdf](http://www.cal-webs.org/handouts06/ReadersTheater.pdf)

### The Purpose and Importance of the Study

The aim of this paper was to expose 11th students views about using Readers' Theatre technique in history lessons and its contribution to the secondary school students.

In foreign countries and also in Turkey Readers' Theatre has been mostly used in the field of language teaching (Sloyer, 1982; Laughlin, Black and Loberg, 1991; Husui, 1994; Martinez, Roser and Strecker 1998; Keehn, 2003; Purdy, 2005; Clarck, 2006; Nussbaum, 2009; Moon, 2009; Bell, Wideroff and Gauferg, 2010; Morris, 2011; Smith, 2011; Uribe, 2013; Unal and Yegen, 2013; Cayir and Ulusoy, 2014) and then social studies (Dick, 2000). However, in Turkey, except for the activities of some theatres and cultural centers, there is not any study just on Readers' Theatre. Due to this fact, the technique is not known by people used in the field of history education. Therefore, it has been considered that this paper could contribute both to introduce and use of the technique in social studies and history disciplines in Turkey.

### Participants

The study group of this research is 77 secondary school students that are attending 11th grade in Deneme Secondary School in Cankaya District, in Ankara during the spring term of 2013 – 2014 school years. However, the forms of five students who left most of the interview form blank were excluded from the research. Therefore, the participants of the research are 72 and 34 of them are male and 38 are female.

### Methodology

In this paper, among the qualitative research method, semi-structured interview is used. When preparing the questions of interview form, it has been noted that the questions are easy to be understood, open-ended, focused and arranged in a logical way (Yildirim and Simsek, 2005: p.128). The semi-structured interview form consists of five main questions about the Readers' Theatre technique. For preparing the form, preliminary implementation of the technique and interviews have been made with 19 students. After analyzing these students' responds to questions, some of the questions were modified and some of them were kept outside the scope of the research. In addition, for the validity of the form, two history educators reviewed the questions and made a few changes. These following questions are the final version of the interview form:

- In your opinion what is Readers' Theater?
- What are the contributions of the use of Readers' Theatre technique to you in history lesson?
- What do you like most in the history lesson in which Readers' Theater technique used? Why?
- What do you like least in the history lesson in which Readers' Theater technique used? Why?

- Would you like Readers' Theatre to be applied again? If so what are your suggestions for better implementation of the technique?

### Data Collection Process

In 11th grade history lessons of selected secondary school, the main aim was to improve historical thinking and grasping of students by using Readers' Theatre. During the 4-week experimental study, Readers' Theatre applications were integrated into the revolution history of Turkish republic and the principles of Ataturk curriculum for 11th grade. The technique was applied by the 11th grade's history teacher at the school. The preliminary work about Readers' Theatre was done by the researcher to explain the technique to the teacher. In addition a pilot implementation of technique with 19 students had been made by researcher to show the correct implementation of the technique to the teacher. After the pilot implementation, the questions that attached the teacher's mind about the technique were answered by researcher. The teacher was used the scripts that determined by the researcher. At the end of the 4-week implementation, the students were asked to write answers to 5 open-ended questions about their opinions on Readers' Theatre. This paper aims to share those findings obtained from the student answers.

### Data Analysis

The data after interview was analyzed by content analysis technique. In order to do this, similar data were brought together under certain concepts and themes, organized and clearly interpreted (Yildirim & Simsek, 2005). To ensure reliability and validity of the study, the decoded data obtained from responses to open-ended questions were classified independently by different researchers. Later these categories were compared with each other and then the final version of categories was created. Frequency distribution (f) and percentages (%) of obtained data are given. The striking responses of the students were given as direct quotes and the participant students' names were coded as S1, S2, and S3 etc. The opinions were analyzed into the following categories:

- The opinions about what is Readers' Theater
- The opinions about the contributions of Readers' Theater
- The opinions about the most and the least liked aspects of Readers' Theatre
- The opinions on the implementation of the activity again and the suggestions for better implementation

### Findings

#### *The opinions about what is Readers' Theater*

The students were asked to express their opinion about "what is Readers' Theater". With this question, it

has been requested from students that what they understand from the activity about Readers' Theatre technique. The opinions on which students were mainly focused are shown in Table 2.

When answers are examined, it is seen that most students were concentrated on the concept of "theatre". The second specified concept is "reading". Even though the disclosure about the concept before the implementation, the number of students who answered the question as "I have no idea" are 15. Another concept that student phrased is "reenactment". Some examples of the students' answers are given below (Table 2)

#### *The opinions about the contributions of Readers' Theater*

In the context of semi-structured interview, "What are the contributions of the use of Readers' Theatre technique to you in history lesson?" as an open-ended question is asked to the students. By this question, it is expected from the students to express the contributions of Readers' Theatre to them. The main themes based on students' answers are shown in Table 3. This result supports the studies (Dick, 2000; Morris, 2011; Smith, 2011; Uribe, 2013; Unal & Yegen, 2013; Cayir & Ulusoy, 2014).

Table 2. The students' opinions about what is Readers' Theatre

Codes	n	%	The Statements of the Students
<b>Theatre</b>	24	33,3	It is theatre that everyone is taking his own task (S10-M)
<b>Reading</b>	13	18.1	Reading with (S29-M)
<b>No idea</b>	10	13,9	I have no idea (S27-M)
<b>Enactment</b>	8	11,1	It is reenactment that students are using their body language and changing their voice by reading (S70-F)
<b>Activity</b>	8	11,1	It is an activity that everyone participates with fun (S30-F)
<b>Vocalization</b>	4	5,5	Vocalize scripts by sharing with our friends (S1-F)
<b>Storytelling</b>	2	2,8	Storytelling with a script (S32-M)
<b>Teaching method</b>	2	2,8	A different type of teaching method (S64-F)
<b>Speaking</b>	1	1,4	Speaking distributed to everyone (S48-F)
<b>Total (N)</b>	72	100	

Table 3. The students' opinions about the contributions of Readers' Theater

Codes	f	The Statements of the Students
<b>Reading</b>	30	It gave me the ability to read (S25-M)
<b>Obtaining historical information</b>	22	It has helped me to get information about the proclamation of the Republic (S2-F)
<b>Understanding</b>	8	It has helped me to understand the lesson better (S15-F)
<b>Toning</b>	8	It has helped me toning what I read (S19-M)
<b>Empathy</b>	7	It made me feel the moment in the history by empathizing (S22-M)
<b>Listening</b>	7	It has contributed in terms of listening and reading (S11-M)
<b>No contribution</b>	7	It hasn't any contribution to me (S32-M)
<b>Focusing</b>	5	It made me focus the lesson (S55-F)
<b>Grasping</b>	5	It made me grasping the subject (S54-F)
<b>Learning</b>	4	It has helped me to learn the proclamation of the Republic (S4-M)
<b>Speaking</b>	4	It has contributed in terms of rhetoric and speaking (S22-M)
<b>Memorability</b>	3	It has helped me to memorize the information (S67-F)
<b>Following the lesson</b>	2	It has contributed to me to follow the lesson (S52-M)
<b>Acting</b>	2	I developed my acting ability (S6-F)
<b>Values</b>	2	I realized the values of the past times (S70-F)
<b>Participation</b>	2	It has enabled me to participate in the lesson (S61-M)
<b>Self-confidence</b>	1	By allowing me to speak within the class, it has increased my self-confidence (S69-F)
<b>Imagining</b>	1	It made me imagine the events of the time (S56-F)
<b>Adaptation</b>	1	It developed my adaptation to the group (S66-F)
<b>Cooperation</b>	1	It improved my ability to work together (S64-F)
<b>Excitement control</b>	1	It has helped me to overcome my excitement (S65-F)
<b>Curiosity</b>	1	It has increased my curiosity to history (S60-F)
<b>Perception</b>	1	It has increased my perception by reading (S10-M)
<b>Dramatization</b>	1	It has contributed to my dramatization skills (S12-F)

***The opinions about the most and the least liked aspects of Readers' Theatre***

As a third open-ended question, their opinions about the most liked and least liked aspects of the technique are asked.

Table 4. The students' opinions about the most liked aspects of Readers' Theatre

Codes	N	%	The Statements of the Students
<b>Cooperation</b>	22	30,5	What I liked most is that we did it cooperatively (S9-M)
<b>Acting</b>	10	14,0	I like enacting (S56-F)
<b>None</b>	9	12,5	There is no aspect that I like (S16-M)
<b>Empathizing with the past</b>	5	7,0	I empathized and felt that time (S43-M)
<b>Vocalizing and toning</b>	5	7,0	I like to tone and vocalize the text (S21-F)
<b>Reading</b>	5	7,0	I enjoy reading my character's sentences (S47-M)
<b>Participating</b>	4	5,5	I liked most to take part in the activity (S15-F)
<b>The content of the script</b>	3	4,1	The script that covers the speech of the first members of the Turkish Parliament (S11-M)
<b>Mustafa Kemal</b>	3	4,1	I like everything about Mustafa Kemal and the text was about him (S5-M)
<b>Obtaining information</b>	2	2,8	Obtaining information about the history of the time in detail (S18-M)
<b>Feeling individuality</b>	1	1,4	I like to feel as an individual (S4-M)
<b>Ease of learning</b>	1	1,4	I liked the activity because it made learning history easier by participating (S7-M)
<b>Having fun</b>	1	1,4	I like to have more fun (S8-F)
<b>Interactivity</b>	1	1,4	I liked doing the activity in an interactive way (S64-F)
<b>Total</b>	72	100	

When Table 4 and the statements are examined, it has been understood that the students like the most to cooperate with their peers (n=22) and to act (n=10). The number of the students who are not mentioned

any aspects are 9. The students are also liked "empathizing with the past" (n=5), "vocalizing and toning" (n=5), "reading" (n=5) and participating (n=4).

Table 5. The students' opinions about the least liked aspects of Readers' Theatre

Codes	n	%	The Statements of the Students
<b>None</b>	48	66,9	There is nothing to dislike (S9-M)
<b>Following</b>	6	8,3	My least like aspect is try to understand the script and follow at the same time (S57-F)
<b>Reading</b>	6	8,3	What I least like is to read (S3-M)
<b>Toning</b>	4	5,5	I had difficulties while toning the script (S26-M)
<b>Excitement</b>	4	5,5	The least liked aspect was my excitement when it was my turn (S69-F)
<b>Words</b>	3	4,1	Some Arabic words that I couldn't understand (S22-M)

<b>Long script</b>	1	1,4	I didn't like the long script (S28-M)
<b>Total</b>	72	100	

### *The opinions on the implementation of Readers' Theatre again and the suggestions for better implementation*

Finally, the students are asked to answer this question "Would you like Readers' Theatre to be applied again? If so what are your suggestions for better implementation of the technique?".

As seen on Table 6, to the fourth open-ended question (Would you like Readers' Theatre to be applied again?), most of the students replied positively (n=52) and the rest negatively (n=20). However, even some of the students who said "no" to this question stated their suggestions for better implementation.

Table 6. The students' opinions on the implementation of the technique again

Opinions	n	%
<b>Yes</b>	52	72,2
<b>No</b>	20	27,8
<b>Total</b>	72	100

Table 7. The students' suggestions for better implementation of the technique

Suggestions	n	%	The Statements of the Students
<b>On stage</b>	15	20,9	It would be better if we do on a theatre stage (S6-F)
<b>The same way</b>	14	19,5	I would like to be applied in the same way (S16-M)
<b>No suggestion</b>	13	18,1	I have no suggestion (S19-M)
<b>Using visuals</b>	11	15,2	It would be good to have some visuals (S14-M)
<b>Music</b>	4	5,5	10 <sup>th</sup> Year anthem can be played (S63-F)
<b>Shorter script</b>	3	4,1	More concise and may be shorter (S58-F)
<b>Longer script</b>	3	4,1	I would like to be a bit longer (S8-F)
<b>Projection</b>	2	2,8	It would be better if the text will be reflected on the board (S46-F)
<b>Rehearsal</b>	2	2,8	The characters can be prepared the text earlier and rehearse it (S73-F)
<b>Different topic</b>	2	2,8	Apply with different topic (S53-F)
<b>Developing the script</b>	1	1,4	It should be applied after the technique is more developed (S42-F)
<b>Video</b>	1	1,4	It would be better if a film or video was used (S9-M)
<b>Realistic</b>	1	1,4	I would like to be more realistic (S24-M)
<b>Total</b>	72	100	

Regarding the continuing "If so what are your suggestions for better implementation of the technique?" question, the students mainly replied "on stage" (n=15) in order to feel they are acting as shown on Table 7. Gunning (2000) also mentioned that dramatizing a story after reading it helps students internalize the story's sequence. They also said "the same way" (n=14) because the implementation is enough for them already, some of them have no suggestion at all (n=13), "using visuals" (n=11) because the lack of the visual elements in the activity as shown on Table 7.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Although previous research has investigated the benefits of Readers' Theatre in language teaching and a

large body of research surrounding using active methods to teach history and thinking skills, a research linking these two subjects is lacking. The results of this exploratory study show promise for using qualitative data analysis led to similar conclusions and revealed that Readers' Theatre can be used as an active method to teach the subject content effectively (Dick, 2000; Morris, 2011; Uribe, 2013). Data from the current study also supports existing researches that recommend using Readers' Theatre for fluent reading, toning, listening, empathizing, understanding, content and concept learning and participating (Hsui, 1994; Clarck, 2006; Moon, 2009; Morris, 2011; Smith, 2011; Wheeler, 2011; Uribe, 2013; Unal & Yegen, 2013; Cayir & Ulusoy, 2014).

The answers of the students to the open-ended questions concerning the applications of the new technique show that Readers' Theatre is mostly defined as theatre and secondly as reading. The data shows that Readers' Theatre technique has contributed also their affective outputs as participation, adaptation, self-confidence, self-control, curiosity of the subject (Dick, 2000; Flynn, 2004; Keehn, 2003; Purdy, 2005; Nussbaaum, 2009; Smith, 2011). According to the students' responses, they like the most the whole class "participation" and the least like following the text and more than half of them have not stated any dislikes. The vast majority of them want the Readers' Theatre to be applied again. As vast majority of the students felt the excitement about history and they wished to repeat these good feelings. This finding is supported by Dick's (2000) and Uribe (2013). The most indicated suggestion which is also emphasized by Gunning (2000) for better implementation is to act on stage and some of them thought that it can be repeated as it is.

As Confucius underlines "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand." Simply put, Readers' Theatre is an act of involvement, an opportunity to share, a time to creatively interact with others, and a personal interpretation of what can be or could be. Readers' Theatre holds the promise of helping students to understand and appreciate the richness of the reading and how language can be a powerful vehicle for the comprehension and appreciation of the subject. It provides numerous opportunities for youngsters to make history come alive and pulsate with their own unique brand of perception and vision. So, an important finding of this study is that Readers' Theatre is a technique that allows students to learn of the lives of the people who make history and also demonstrated that how the historical characters who come alive could be put back into history lesson. In this sense, Readers' Theatre is a technique which is challenged to learn academic content and thinking skills simultaneously.

### Recommendations

A further research can be designed by teaching students to adapt favorite scenes from historical writings into a Readers' Theatre format and using students' own scripts. Most children are not familiar enough with history to write original historical scripts, but they can interpret scenes created by authors who have carefully researched the historical era to be presented. If students can research a particular historical event and write their own historical script cooperatively, the genuine history learning will be enhanced. It would provide insight, if the effects of Readers' Theatre on some skills as reading, empathy, historical understanding or achievement of historical knowledge and concepts would be examined for the further studies.

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