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Multilingual Readers' Theatre



THE CENTRAL TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESSES OF MULTILINGUAL READERS' THEATRE

A Guideline for the Classroom

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The Project

The MELT project aims at developing a multilingual guided reading program to improve reading fluency as well as reading motivation in all languages for pupils in year 6, 7 and 8. The didactic-methodological design developed for this purpose addresses three key issues in language education and foreign language instruction:

Results of major reading performance studies over the past decade have shown that in the countries involved in this project, large deficits in reading skills exist for both languages of instruction as well as foreign languages being learned, particularly at the lower secondary school level.

Instead of isolated language learning, a stronger network of school language and foreign language instruction should be promoted. However, until today only a few specific proposals exist as to how the multilingual repertoire of pupils can be used in reading instruction.

The promotion of individual multilingualism is a declared objective of EU education policy: At least 75% of secondary school pupils should learn at least two foreign languages.

Unlike conventional theatrical productions in which scripts are memorized and then acted out, in Readers' Theatre the dramatic texts are divided into smaller units and then allocated to the pupils who then read them aloud, using only their voices and facial expressions to convey meaning. As the main focus of Readers' Theatre is on reading aloud, Readers' Theatre is used in school contexts – particularly in the U.S. - as a successful method for increasing reading fluency and reading motivation. In the European region, Readers' Theatre is scarcely known as a means of promoting reading. In addition, no Reading Theatre scripts with multiple language roles exist.

More information can be found at
www.multilingual-readers-theatre.eu



Project Partners

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Didactic-methodological commentary

In the course of the research and development of the Multilingual Readers' Theatre (Mehrsprachiges Lesetheater - MELT) design, the formative evaluation of the trial cycles led to the emergence of eight essential steps. These steps serve to structure the teaching-learning process of the MELT design didactically and methodologically, as well as integrate various social interaction forms: plenary (PL), group work (GW), partner work (PW), and individual work (IW).

Table 1 provides an overview of these central steps with the respective interaction forms. The indicated times are to be understood as a rough estimate of the time needed to carry out the entire design. How much time is actually spent teaching depends, for example, on how long the scenes are, how detailed the Multilingual Readers' Theatre is, how routined pupils are in dealing with oral reading methods, how intensively literary learning is stimulated, how familiar pupils are with giving feedback, etc. In order to ease the first implementation of MELT, it is recommended that the basic working methods are introduced separately during regular classroom teaching time.

Teaching-Learning Process	***Social form***	***Approx. time***
1. Teacher introduces Multilingual Readers' Theatre	PL	15-20
2. Teacher reads book passages aloud	PL	5-10
3. Pupils read script scenes and are assigned roles	IW/GW	10-15
4. Pupils summarize content of their scenes	GW	15-25
5. Pupils introduce scenes and individual roles	PL	15-25
6. Pupils practice roles and provide mutual feedback	PW	20-45
7. General rehearsal and feedback	GW	20-45
8. Final performance	PL	25-45

Table 1: Overview of the teaching-learning stages of the MELT design

Further references to the practical implementation and theoretical foundations on which the didactic-methodological design is based upon can be found in Handbuch zu Theorie und Praxis des Mehrsprachigen Lesetheaters (Handbook on Theory and Practice of Multilingual Readers' Theatre): Ilg, Angelika / Goetz, Kristina and Kutzelmann, Sabine / Massler, Ute / Peter, Klaus (eds.) (In preparation, expected to be published in 2017): Mehrsprachiges Lesetheater. Handbuch zu Theorie und Praxis. (Multilingual Readers' Theatre: Handbook on Theory and Practice). Leverkusen: Verlag Barbara Budrich.

Multilingual Readers' Theatre material for primary and secondary level education, as well as a film with excerpts from various lessons depicting the eight central steps of the MELT design, can be found at:

www.melt-multilingual-readers-theatre.eu.



The following section describes the eight central steps of the MELT teaching-learning process and the didactic reasons for their implementation. In addition, further methodological suggestions are provided as good-practice examples based on what cooperating teachers experienced during the trials; these are intended to help other teachers apply methodologically diverse forms of the MELT multilingual reading fluency techniques in their classes.

In the reality of the classroom, there will always be situations that make it necessary or practical to reorganize or repeat individual steps. The sequence of the steps should not be regarded as a rigid sequential structure, but rather offer a didactically well justified frame of orientation.



1 Introduction of the Multilingual Readers' Theatre

Multilingual Readers' Theatre, in which pupils read and work in small groups, to the most part independently, is initially introduced by the teacher. The teacher introduces key elements such as plot, characters, and settings by using various drama exercises. In order to facilitate comprehension, the (foreign) language prerequisites can be established during this phase. The scope and intensity of content and linguistic elements that need to be pretaught depend on the Readers' Theatre piece and pupils' previous knowledge.

Didactic-methodological considerations

The following working methods can help learners understand the Multilingual Readers' Theatre:

(1) Introduce the book that the Readers' Theatre (RT) is based upon.

(2) Show an image representing a central scene in the book and let pupils speculate on what the RT is about.

(3) Show a short segment of a film based on the book.

(4) Sketch a character constellation on the board.

(5) Note down the titles of the individual scenes in the RT piece on the blackboard.

(6) Hang up any book illustrations or relevant pictorial material in the classroom to help the pupils understand the text.

(7) If the piece is more complex, provide the pupils with a written summary.

(8) First read the original literary text together in class.





Drama exercises as a resource

After the pupils have gained a first impression of the plot and main characters, or know what the RT is about, the teacher can introduce various drama exercises or activities to help pupils develop individual characters. For example, *hot seating* is an activity that lets pupils slip into the role of a certain character in the piece. The other pupils are then instructed to ask the character on the hot seat questions about their biography, situation, preferences, feelings, etc.

Foreign language support

Introducing the RT also incorporates teaching relevant vocabulary that the pupils need to comprehend in order to understand what the teacher is reading aloud, and to be able to work with their scripts. For this reason, it is advisable to carry out steps (1) – (8) as outlined above entirely or in part in the foreign language.

If pupils need help to correctly pronounce and intonate the foreign language passages in the scenes, some of the following exercises are particularly helpful and can be used repeatedly in the later phases of the process as well:

(1) With *tongue twisters*, specific sounds and sound combinations occur frequently, so pupils have to concentrate considerably when pronouncing the words, in order not to confuse the sounds. This exact decoding helps to concentrate on the articulation process, which is helpful later as well.

(2) In the exercise, *reading a sentence with different intonations*, the pupils read one or more difficult phrases from the piece out loud in plenary or with a partner using different intonations. Since the learners do not yet know the specific context in which the sentence is situated, different interpretations of the sentence are possible, and thus different intonations as well (this is also useful to do in step 4).

(3) The *one-sentence story* technique aims at training close listening skills and securing the pronunciation of difficult words within the context. In this exercise, a sentence fragment that fits to the RT piece is given. In succession, each pupil then adds one word to the sentence and then repeats the entire sentence.

Working materials

In order to organise the work with the materials effectively, one could proceed as follows: At the beginning of the lesson, each working group is given a group folder in which they should collect all documents. The group folders contain: (a) a cover sheet with the names of the group members, (b) the corresponding number of RT scripts (the students write their names on their copies), (c) one coloured overview copy for the group's cooperative working steps. If the students are given reading exercises as homework, they should take their personal scripts home with them.

Classrooms

During the practicing phases of the RT, a classroom is usually too small for the entire class to practice inside, so additional rooms must be organized. These should be as close as possible to each other in order to make it easier for the teacher to move from room to room. If necessary, another supervisor should be asked to join the lessons.

2 Teacher reads multilingual text passages aloud

The teacher reads a central, multilingual passage from the original literary source of the RT. This allows the teacher to model the oral and visual interpretation of the text for his or her pupils. The teacher can then use this passage to discuss with the pupils the contents of the piece, as well as arouse their general curiosity for Multilingual Readers' Theatre.

Didactic-methodological considerations





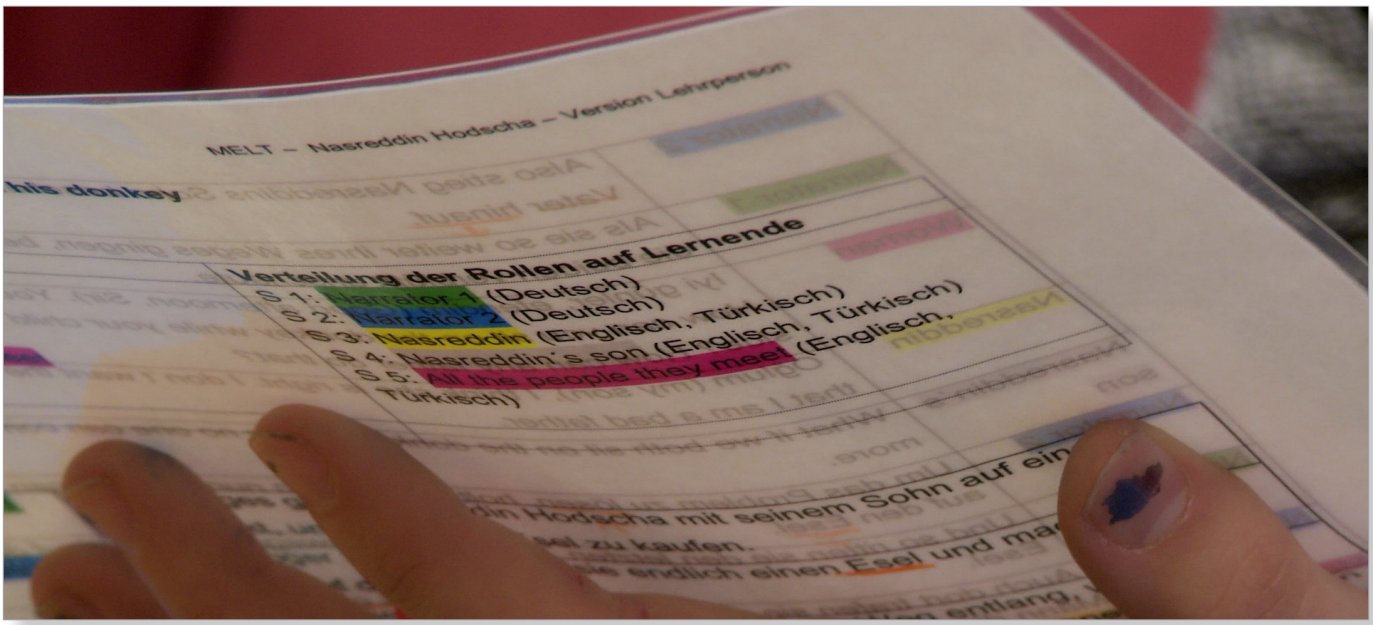
Multilingual Readers' Theatre should be used in general language education as well as in foreign language instruction. If the reading script includes languages that are not part of the teacher's active language repertoire, it is a good idea to involve a colleague who can help with these.

The pupils may receive specific observation tasks while they are watching and listening to the teacher (or teachers) read aloud. For example, the use of voice, pauses, gestures, facial expressions, etc.

In order to make it easier for the pupils to understand and empathize with the characters in the story, the teacher, after reading aloud, can discuss and develop together with the pupils the individual characters appearing in the story.

In order for pupils to be attentive and relaxed while listening, it can be helpful to use a different seating arrangement (e.g., circle of chairs) that signals the difference from the regular classroom context.

Pupils read script scenes and are assigned roles



The pupils divide themselves into working groups. Each pupil reads the scene assigned to their working group; first silently on their own, making sure that they understand what is taking place in the scene. Then following this silent reading phase, the reading roles are assigned to the individual members of the group, and any ideas that are important to help understand the scene are discussed and clarified within the group. The teacher's role during this step is to circulate and provide assistance if necessary.

Didactic-methodological considerations

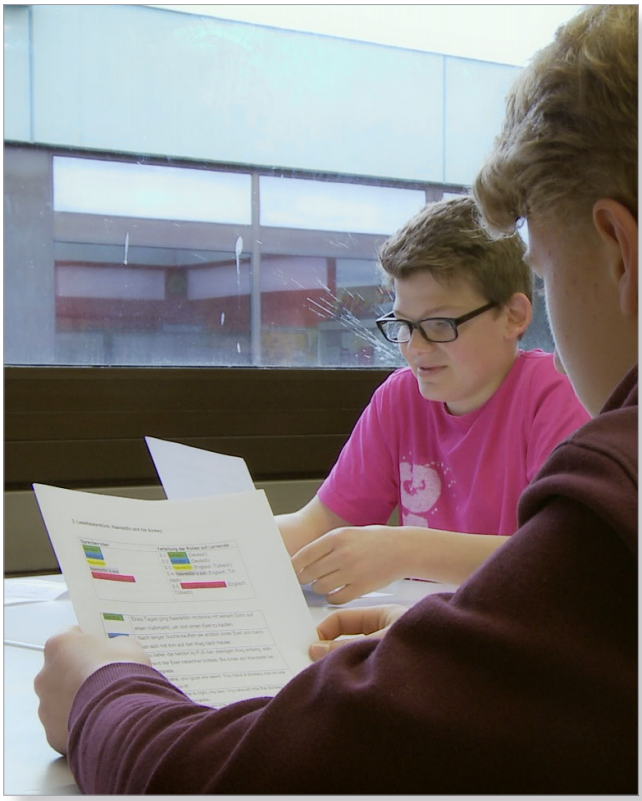
Integrating minority languages: In Multilingual Readers' Theatre, it is possible to not only include the school language and the foreign language being taught, any additional language occurring in the class can also be integrated. In order to clarify which pupil is an expert for their language, the class should be informed at this point about the language skills of the individual pupils. The size of a working group depends on the number of readers per scene. In order to achieve the greatest possible practice effect on reading fluency, no more than 4 to 5 pupils should work together in a group.

At the beginning, learners initially only take on one role each, as unpractised speakers often encounter difficulties when required to read two different roles.

The range of different character and narrator roles may vary greatly. When assigning roles, an important moment for most pupils, the casting should be discussed with them. Pupils can be reminded that the RT activity will be repeated again with other scripts and it is important to be „fair“ to all students when choosing roles.

In order for pupils to stay focused on their roles, it is particularly important that unpractised pupils highlight their lines with a marker when they first receive their script.

If enough time is available for the practice phase in step 6, it can be agreed upon that all pupils in a working group practice for all the roles in the scene. In this case, the teacher can randomly assign the roles directly before the performance.





4 Pupils summarize content of their scenes

The pupils read their scene a second time as their assigned character and together analyse sentence meanings, the content of difficult sentences, or the importance of key words, especially in the foreign and minority languages. After a third reading, each group prepares an oral summary or an overview of their scene, which they present to the whole class.

Didactic-methodological considerations

General note on the methodological implementation of this step
In Multilingual Readers' Theatres that consist of only a few scenes or individual episodes, it may be more interesting and exciting for the performance itself if not all scenes are presented in plenary, leaving certain details to be seen and heard by all only at the end.

In order to understand the RT in detail, which consists of narrator and character reading roles, *guiding questions* may help the pupils elaborate on the content of their scene. Questions that are especially effective address *inner action* (e.g., feelings, sensations, thought processes, etc.) and stimulate pupils to analyse and reflect on the characters in depth. At the beginning of this stage, the teacher should explain that during this phase it is important that the pupils prepare an oral summary of each scene for the other groups, so that everyone can understand what is taking place throughout the entire piece.

All central elements of a scene should be visually depicted on a large poster that can be hung up in the classroom. Key words for the scene can be written down. The resulting collage of what is taking place during the scene is then presented to the other working groups.

Drama resources

A drama technique such as *freeze-frame* can be used to focus on the main action of a scene. The pupils first decide together on a situation in their scene that represents in some way something pivotal or unique (a central conflict, something comical or dramatic, etc.). This situation is then depicted by some members of the group as a single 'frozen' image. The other remaining members of the group describe the frozen scene: who represents which figure, how the figures relate to each other, what they think, feel, etc. Alternatively, the figures themselves could tell who they are, and what they think and do.

In this phase, it would also be possible to use the *hot seating* exercise to help characterize individual figures (see Step 1).



Foreign language support

In order for the groups to be able to solve their own language comprehension difficulties by themselves, specific words and phrases in the foreign language and/or other languages can be provided along with the translations.

The following approaches are particularly appropriate:

(1) Each group has a poster that is hung in the classroom. This lets the group check for words by themselves during the independent cooperative learning phases.

(2) Each group member receives a laminated version of their RT script. A first step is for the pupils to write down notes for individual words or passages (for example, how to pronounce certain words, or the meanings of specific words, etc.) on the laminated sheets with an overhead marker. In a second step, the group has the task to compile their individual notes into a joint document that then serves as a guide for the other working groups (see also the comment on Working Materials under Step 1).





Pupils introduce scenes and individual roles

To ensure that students develop a comprehensive understanding of the RT beyond their individual scenes, each working group must present their scene to the whole class. In this phase it may be helpful to offer creative drama exercises and/or literature discussions.

Didactic-methodological considerations

Different pupils in the working groups can present the plot and characters of their scene to the class; each pupil can focus on one aspect discussed in the group in respect to the guiding questions. After presenting the scene, the other groups should be given the opportunity to ask questions.

The content of the scene can, if it is necessary, be presented using the collage developed in Step 4.

Drama resources

The content of a scene can also be presented with the help of the previously developed freeze-frame (see Step 4): Once the 'frozen' image is set up, the pupils remain in their positions until other members of the group or even all the characters themselves have described the frozen scene and their different roles to the audience.

In this phase, the hot seating exercise can also be used to help develop individual character roles (see Steps 1 and 4).





Pupils practice roles and provide mutual feedback

The pupils read through their scene several times in a low voice and then give each other feedback. During the first practice runs, the main focus is on the correct decoding and pronunciation of the words, especially if the pupil is an inexperienced reader. With increasing automatization and repetition at the word and sentence level, the pupils have more cognitive resources available to do in-depth analysis of the text. A good understanding of the scene improves the overall prosodic composition of the reading; the pupils can then concentrate more on how the scenes are divided into meaningful and cohesive sections, as well as on their facial expressions, accentuation, intonation and pauses.

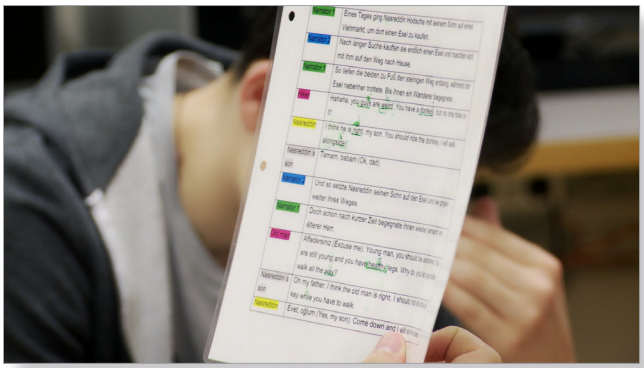
Didactic-methodological considerations

To stimulate pupil's reading out loud, and to create a focused atmosphere in which they can practice effectively, the following preparatory vocal and physical exercises are recommended:

(1) Pupils can repeat individual words and phrases of their dialogue with bottle corks in their mouths. In this way, they practice articulating as clearly as possible.

(2) Pupils can read their roles out loud in a low voice to themselves while walking around the classroom, without touching each other. It is important to make sure that the pupils understand that while practicing they should not read silently to themselves, but rather read aloud in a low, clear voice. The teacher can act as a model. As this reading aloud exercise is best done on one's own, pupils should look for their own space to practice in, so as not to be disturbed or disturb others. This exercise should be repeated several times to help pupils improve.

In order to build and increase pupils' motivation to practice, it is useful to vary the methods being used. In addition to independent practice and repeated reading aloud with or without audio support, the following cooperative learning approaches for pair work are especially effective: (1) *Tandem reading:* sections with individual reading roles are simultaneously and quietly



read aloud in pairs. The scene script with the clearly marked roles lies between the two pupils. As a first step, the partners agree on who will be the 'coach' and who will be the 'athlete'. The job of the coach is to do an exemplary reading of his/her section of the text. This should be done in a fluid manner, so that the athlete can read along and thus coordinate his/her reading accordingly. To coordinate the synchronous reading between the tandem partners and to focus attention, the coach should use his/her finger to follow along in the script. By doing this, the athlete can read along and orient themselves to the reading model of the coach. Tandem reading allows reading partners to alternate between the roles of coach and athlete.

Prosodic and creative reading can be trained with a *mirror-reading* exercise. In this exercise two pupils work together: Pupil A reads a single sentence with a certain intonation pattern, while Pupil B has the task of imitating the sentence as closely or as mirror-like as possible. Then Pupil A reads the same sentence with a different intonation pattern, and Pupil B repeats the sentence in a mirror-like manner again, etc.

Many pupils find it easier to get into character, read expressively, and use gestures and facial expressions when they face their partners and are able to look at them while speaking. This is something the teacher should point out.

The scripts can be placed on music stands, so that it is easier for pupils to gesture freely and use both hands in their performance.

Foreign language support

In order to help pupils practice the correct pronunciation of the foreign language on their own, the teacher can provide them with self-produced audio files. For example, pupils can get a data carrier with audio recordings and then practice the correct pronunciation at home by listening to the passages several times and reading along in their script. The more often a word is articulated in the foreign language, the more effectively the word and its pronunciation can be stored in the mental dictionary.

When practicing reading roles, exercises such as *tandem reading, one-sentence story,* and *reading a sentence with different intonations* are particularly effective methods. If pupils have already practiced individual sentences in their respective roles, one can use the *free dialogue* method. Here pupils move through the classroom until they meet up with another person, then both read an arbitrary sentence from their role to each other. In addition, the teacher can select certain foreign language phrases that they consider particularly challenging to pronounce. He or she can articulate these carefully and ask the pupils to imitate them.

Training of error perception in the foreign language

While practicing their individual reading roles, many learners have difficulty noticing any foreign language pronunciation errors they themselves or others may be making. Since the pupils can only seek out advice and improve if they are aware of these mistakes, their error perception must be trained. This can be done in various manners:



(1) Independent reading and marking of uncertainties. (2) Assessment: Other pupils or the teacher can offer suggestions for improvement after the pupil has read aloud. (3) (a) During vocabulary introduction, the pupils receive a vocabulary list and collectively clarify the correct pronunciation. The pupils can listen to and secure the correct pronunciation by using a website (such as www.leo.org). (b) Audio files with the foreign language tracks are played, while two pupils with the same role stand next to each other. One pupil reads his/her script aloud at the same time as the audio recording is playing, while the other pupil reads along quietly and monitors for mistakes.

Methods such as *free dialogue* or *tandem reading* are useful for receiving and giving feedback to other learners on foreign language pronunciation. If minority languages are used, then in this phase native speaking pupils' language support is necessary and they can bring in their pronunciation expertise.

Reflection on the practice process

In order to continuously improve cooperation, it is important to occasionally integrate reflection phases. In these reflection phases, pupils are given the opportunity to reflect on their work process. The following aspects are appropriate themes: (1) The intensity of the mutual support, (2) how well the practice strategies have been implemented (audio support, tandem reading, mirroring), (3) or the use of the provided learning time.





7 Rehearsal and Feedback

Every working group performs their RT scene in a general rehearsal. The general rehearsal allows the individual readers to coordinate their roles with each other and practice as a group. This gives the pupils the opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of their reading performance, and whether their mode of presentation engages an audience.

During the general rehearsal, feedback from the teacher and/or other pupils is helpful so that the group can assess whether or not their use of non-verbal techniques (e.g., eye-contact, gestures, and facial expressions) is effective. Drama exercises can be used to strengthen the pupils' performative skills and help them prepare for their final performance.

Didactic-methodological considerations

The following procedures and aspects should be taken into account to emphasize the importance of the general rehearsal, which also should be carried out at least once without interruption before the final performance:

(1) Performance room: The performance can be presented in the classroom, but also in a larger room, such as a gym, if a larger audience is expected. In this instance, it is important to check the acoustics of the room in advance.

(2) Stage: In the classroom and/or in any other room, a section of the room should be partitioned off to become the stage for the final performance of the Multilingual Readers' Theatre.

(3) Stage positions: By using stage markings – e.g., with the aid of different coloured markings on the ground – students see the correct positions they should be in to perform their scene. For example, students with narration roles can stand along the edges of the stage, while students with performing roles are in the middle of the stage.

(4) Stage entrance and exit: Someone from the group gives a sign, agreed upon in advance, for joint entrance onto the stage as well as joint exit from the stage.

(5) Costumes and props: The possible use and selection of costumes and props is an impor-



tant aspect for the performance and the pupils. Therefore, the teacher should reinforce creative ideas if they can be easily implemented. However, the teacher should also remember that Multilingual Readers' Theatre and modern theatre are minimally staged productions, i.e. complicated stage designs, costumes and props are not compulsory.

(6) Music stand: In order to profit the most from the visual means available to RT, it would be helpful for the students to use music stands for their scripts.

(7) Audience: The arrangement of the audience in a U-form or chair circle allows for optimal visibility and acoustics. Ideally, the groups will sit together, allowing for quick group changes.

(8) Performance start: Each speaker and narrator briefly explains the role he or she plays: "I am the wolf", etc.

For the general rehearsal to be effective and beneficial, pupils should give each other feedback. This is best done when two groups perform their respective scenes for each other.

To provide constructive and informative feedback, pupils can use focused feedback methods (e.g., task cards that summarize the main ideas). The observers should be reminded to pay attention to key dramatic reading criteria, such as volume, tempo, gestures/facial expressions, intonation, etc. Alternatively, the pupils can also be asked to give their praise to the other performing group, followed by a suggestion for further improvement.

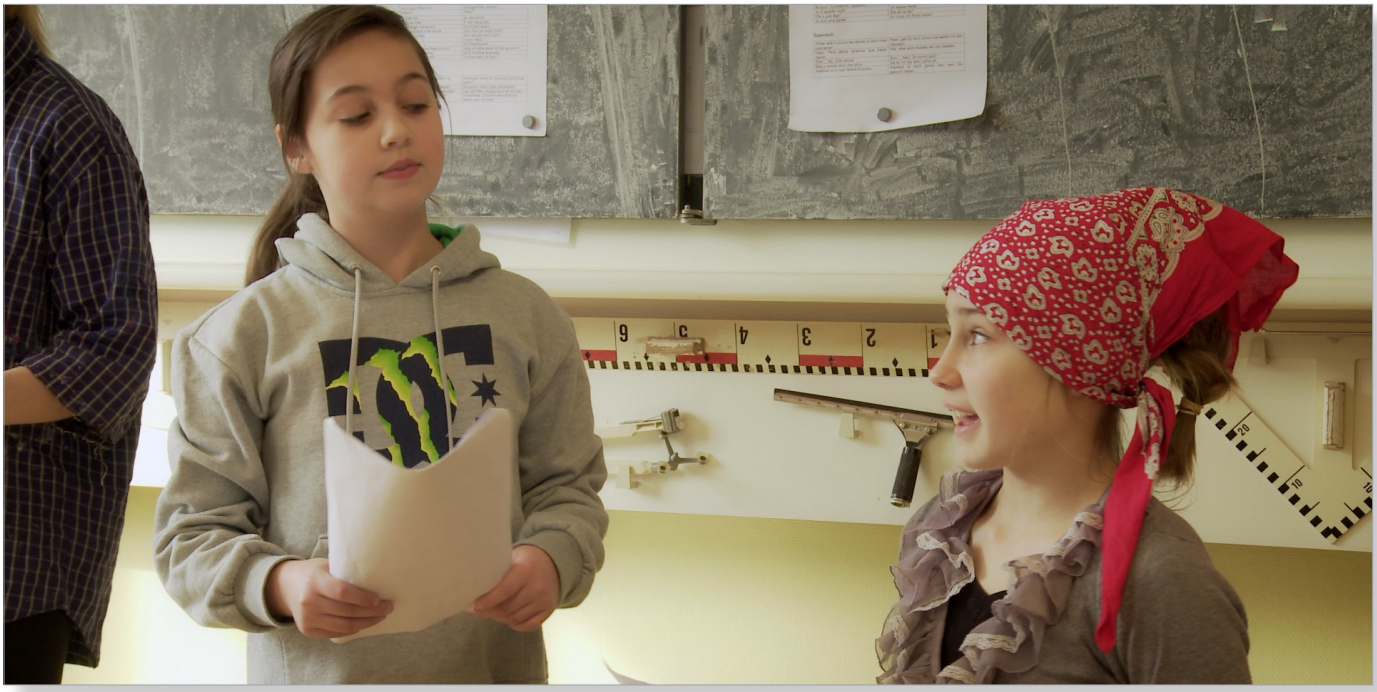
Reflection of the work process during the rehearsal: After the general rehearsal, the following aspects can be reflected on:

(1) the intensity of the mutual support;

(2) how effectively the time was used in the rehearsal;

(3) in what way all of the ideas of the group members were discussed with regard to the performance.





8 Performance

Every working group reads their RT scene to the whole class. The entire Multilingual Readers' Theatre performance should be entertaining for the pupils watching and listening. The applause at the end of the performance is, as in a traditional play, the reward for all the effort and the learning progress made during the formative reading. A subsequent literary discussion will deepen the understanding of the entire RT and offer pupils the possibility to relate to the text.

Didactic-methodological considerations

The performance is extremely important for the pupils, which is why the presence of an additional group/class will further increase this appreciation in the eyes of the performers.

Drama resources

To make sure the pupils feel safe and comfortable when performing, they can be given the following *vocal and physical exercises*:

(1) *Building body tension*: The class stands in a circle and all pupils stand like trees, with their legs close together and their feet firmly planted on the ground; then they all begin to sway slightly with their upper bodies, while remaining firmly rooted.

(2) *Practicing eye contact:* The class stands in a circle and the teacher gives one pupil a clap signal by looking at the pupil and briefly clapping his/her hands together. The pupil, who has been looked at and has received the clap signal, can pass it on to anyone else within the circle. The game can be varied by passing on two clap signals simultaneously within the circle.

Performance plan: In order to appreciate and treat all groups equally, the groups should be allowed to present their Multilingual Readers' Theatre scenes successively without interruption. It is also possible for observing pupils or the teacher to highlight particularly successful performances.



If rules for constructive and fair peer feedback have already been introduced and ritualized in the class, then the performance of the same scenes can be comparatively assessed by a student jury.

Reflection of the whole group process: After the performance, the following aspects are useful points to reflect on:

(1) What was good about the cooperation within the group;

(2) What did someone do particularly well;

(3) What could be done better in the next performance.





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