Developing Reading Comprehension through Literate Conversations

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ABSTRACT

To be considered proficient readers, students must not only be able to read at grade level, they must also be able to synthesize, explain, and analyze what they read. In an effort to increase reading comprehension of my low achieving students, I implemented quick-shares, short partner reading discussions, during the self-selected reading block.

Students were introduced to four topics that could be used as the focus of the quick-shares: likes or dislikes, story elements, main ideas, and connections. Each type was introduced and modeled. After the introduction, students were given the opportunity to use one of the topics to discuss what they had read with a partner.

The findings of this study supported the claims that adding a conversation component during self-selected reading is enjoyable for students and helps them to develop their discussion skills. The findings did not, however, support the claim that initiating literate conversations can increase reading comprehension among students.
STUDY SEQUENCE

June – August
- Attended a course on supporting the struggling reader at Cardinal Stritch

September
- Identified a classroom problem: supporting struggling readers during self-selected reading (SSR)
- Finalized the question
- Wrote Statement of the Problem
- Wrote Situating the Problem
- Established SSR guidelines
- Began collecting baseline data through informal observations
- Began researching for Review of Literature

October
- Wrote Review of Literature
- Continued collecting baseline data through informal observations
- Collected baseline data on reading levels with the Rigby PM Benchmark Kit assessment
- Implemented intervention
- Wrote Methods section

November
- Concluded intervention
- Collected post intervention data with the Rigby PM Benchmark Kit and through informal observations
- Wrote Findings and Conclusions

December
- Submitted final paper
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The definition of what it means to be a proficient reader has changed in recent years. To be considered proficient, students must not only be able to read at grade level, they must also be able to synthesize, explain, and analyze what they read. Although a large portion of my reading instruction is focused on reading comprehension strategies, many of my students are not able to independently use these strategies to engage in literate conversations. As a result, many of my students’ comprehension gains are limited. In an effort to solve this problem, I plan to utilize quick-shares, short partner reading discussions, during the self-selected reading block in an attempt to increase reading comprehension of my low achieving students.

SITUATING THE PROBLEM

This study was conducted during my fourth year as a first grade teacher. The school in which the study was conducted was a K-5 neighborhood school with approximately 400 students. The study school student population included high numbers of at-risk students, students with special needs, English Language Learners, and students from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

I teach language arts using a four-block method. The four blocks are: guided reading, writing, word work, and self-selected reading. Each block focuses on a particular aspect of literacy development. The aim is to use the four blocks in combination with one another to help students use effective reading strategies to achieve understanding in their reading.

During the guided reading block, I use the Harcourt Trophies reading series as the basis for instruction. I use the stories in the series to introduce, model, and practice reading
comprehension strategies with my students. It is my expectation that students then use these strategies independently during the self-selected reading block.

The problem I have observed is that students are not consistently using the strategies we have practiced. Some of my students simply decode the words and do not think about what they mean. When asked about what they are reading, students often reply that they don’t know or they forgot. They then proceed to flip back through the pages. Other students have an understanding of the text, but are unsure of what or how to discuss.

These observations caused me to question how I could help students consistently and independently use reading comprehension strategies during the self-selected reading block to increase their reading comprehension. During the summer of 2007, I participated in professional development course that focused on supporting and instructing the struggling reader. One of the ideas offered was the use of quick-shares to initiate literate conversations among students. Within this paper I describe my efforts to implement this approach in my classroom.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Importance of Comprehension

The purpose of reading is to gain meaning. Students must not only be able to decode the words on a page, but must be able to synthesize, explain, and analyze what they read (Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002). Reading comprehension is most often discussed in relation to the educational context. However, reading comprehension is essential not only for academic learning, but for lifelong learning as well (Strickland et. al., 2002).

Good readers are very active when they read. They interact mentally with a text in order to make sense of what they read (Strickland et. al., 2002). Good readers accomplish this task by
using a number of strategies as they proceed through a text (Pressley, 2002). Some of these strategies include: making connections to prior knowledge, using mental imagery, questioning, and summarizing (Block & Pressley, 2002). Using these and other comprehension strategies is not always a natural process. Rather, students must be explicitly taught comprehension strategies and how to use them. In Block and Pressley’s (2002) review of reading comprehension research, they found that researchers, regardless of the program used, agreed that comprehension instruction should include modeling, scaffolding, and guided practice of strategies. Students should then practice using these strategies independently so they may develop a self-regulation of comprehension processes.

Putting Comprehension Strategies into Practice

In order to practice using comprehension strategies independently, students must be provided with opportunities to read. One way to accomplish this is through the establishment of a self-selected reading (SSR) time, also known as voluntary reading.

SSR takes place during the school day, often as part of language arts, and can last anywhere from five to thirty minutes. During this time students read silently and independently from a variety of materials including books, magazines, and comics. There are no book reports, assignments, or grades (Krashen, 2006). Additional characteristics of a successful SSR time include: consistently setting aside time for SSR, having access to appealing and interesting texts, and creating a child-friendly reading environment (Pilgreen, 2000). The rationale for SSR is to provide an opportunity for students to practice reading at their independent reading level in order to develop fluency, increase vocabulary, enhance comprehension, and improve wide reading (Pilgreen, 2000).
SSR is an important component of a balanced literacy program. A balanced literacy program includes: teacher modeling of reading and writing, interactive reading and writing between teacher and students, word study, and independent reading and writing (Strickland et.al., 2002). Research suggests a positive correlation between time spent reading and reading achievement (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). Research also suggests that students who engage in SSR know more about a variety of topics (Krashen, 2006), perform better on standardized reading tests, and receive higher grades in school (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006).

Adding Conversation to SSR Time

Unfortunately, traditional SSR programs are not always effective, especially for reluctant readers. In many classrooms disengaged readers can be found doing anything but reading. Some students move from place to place, while others simply flip through the pages of a book. In addition, some students consistently read books below their ability level or become stuck reading the same genre (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). These students are struggle with self-motivation and lack focus for their reading.

One way to address the problem of disengaged readers during SSR is to add a conversation component. Most people are social by nature. We stop to chat with friends and colleagues, listen to radio talk shows, and watch television programs that feature the host talking about a range of topics. When effectively incorporated into the classroom, this tendency to talk can become a valuable learning tool (Roser & Martinez, 1995).

There are a variety of ways that conversation can become part of the regular SSR routine. Teachers can lead whole class or small group discussions, students can participate in literature circles, or partner discussions can be used. Whichever format is implemented, the key is to have the discussion focus on a component of reading (Eeds & Peterson, 1995).
Studies conducted on classrooms that have incorporated a conversation component into their SSR time have reported positive results regarding student engagement and understanding. Parr and Maguiness (2005) found that when teachers removed the silent characteristic from SSR time by adding teacher led conversations with small groups, students enjoyed having the opportunity to discuss their reading and were able to reflect more deeply on their reading selections.

Hobbs (1989) noted similar findings after including time for whole class discussion immediately following SSR. Hobbs discovered that her students developed new, more thoughtful insights about their reading, after they were provided with time to discuss and reflect their SSR selection.

Other researchers have incorporated conversations and writing into their literacy programs. After a seven-month study, Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006) found that metacognitive strategy instruction combined with reflective writing and conversations about reading led to increased comprehension in students. It was also noted that students were choosing to read a variety of genres, whereas initially the range of genres was narrow (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006).

Using *Quick-Shares*

Another technique for incorporating conversation into the classroom is using the *quick-share* strategy. *Quick-shares* are short literate conversations between partners. During this activity, each student has one minute to share what they have read. Students can discuss various literary elements, connections that they made with the text, or things in the text that they found interesting. The brief amount of time allotted is meant to focus students’ discussions and to share just enough information to peak their partner’s curiosity (Gambrell, 2002).
Quick-shares are a simple way to get students talking about books. They do not require a lot of planning and can be conducted whenever there are a few extra minutes to fill. Quick-shares do, however, keep students motivated and provide multiple opportunities for students to share about what they read (Gambrell, 2002).

A review of literature examining effective SSR programs and conversation models indicated that including time for students to talk about what they read can be beneficial. I was excited to find out if including conversations in the form of quick-shares would be successful in my classroom.

METHODS

Participants

Participants for this study were selected from two regular education first grade classrooms. During the study, one of the classrooms received the intervention and the other classroom served as the control group. Although all students in these two classrooms either received the intervention or were part of the control classroom, the data from only eight students, four from the treatment classroom and four from the control classroom, was analyzed. All eight of the targeted students struggled with reading.

Data Collection

Pre and post intervention data was collected on students’ individual reading comprehension levels using the Rigby PM Benchmark Kit assessment. During the assessment, each student was given a leveled text from the kit to read out loud. After reading the text, students were asked to discuss the characters and setting and give a brief summary of what they read. Students were then asked a series of comprehension questions. Each assessment required
approximately ten minutes to complete. See Appendix A for a sample text and corresponding questions.

Throughout the intervention, I also recorded my thoughts and observations in a journal. I made notes about each targeted student’s engagement during SSR time and their willingness to participate in the quick-shares sessions.

Data Analysis

While conducting the Rigby PM Benchmark Kit assessment, I listened to and took notes on each student as he/she read a leveled text. During the assessment, I also had a copy of the text, typed on one side of an 8 ½ by 11 inch sheet of paper. As the student read, I made notes about their miscues, fluency, and use of reading strategies. After the student read the text, I tape recorded his/her text summary and responses to the comprehension questions. I was then able to analyze each student’s oral reading and his/her ability to understand a text both before and after the intervention. This allowed me to determine if students had shown growth in their ability to read and comprehend a text.

I also analyzed my pre- and post-intervention journal notes. I highlighted statements containing my thoughts and observations about students’ engagement during SSR and their willingness to participate in quick-shares. I then compared these notes to my pre intervention observations and my past experiences with students during SSR.

INTERVENTION

Both classrooms used the Harcourt Trophies Reading Series as the basis for reading instruction. Each week a specific story was used to teach a specific skill such as sequencing or determining the main idea. Supplemental activities designed by grade level teachers were also
used to help develop students’ grammar and word skills. Both classrooms spent approximately one hour and forty-five minutes daily on language arts. Thirty minutes was spent on shared/guided reading, thirty minutes on writing, fifteen minutes on word work, and thirty minutes on self-selected reading (SSR).

Before the intervention could begin, it was necessary to have three conditions established. First, students needed to be aware of the expectations for SSR time. In both the control classroom and the classroom receiving the intervention, the expectations were as follows:

1. Read silently or quietly to yourself.
2. Use strategies such as looking at the pictures or using the sounds to help you figure out unknown words.
3. Think about what you read.
4. Read at your desk, except on your special day (each student was assigned a day during the week when they could sit anywhere in the classroom).

Having these expectations in place helped students become independent in their reading and allowed SSR time to run smoothly.

Second, students needed to have access to reading materials at their independent reading level. This was accomplished in both classrooms through the use of individual book baskets. Each student had a book basket consisting of reading materials from a variety of genres. Some of the books were slightly below the student’s reading level, some were on level, and some were slightly above. I selected the books, but made an attempt to include texts related to students’ interests. For example, one student was very interested in dogs, so I included both fiction and nonfiction texts on dogs in his book basket. Individualized book baskets provided students with
appropriate reading material related to their interests and allowed them to spend SSR time reading rather than looking for an interesting book.

Finally, students needed to be familiar with and have an understanding of literary terms. During guided/shared reading, students were introduced to the different types of genres including: fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, and realistic fiction. Students practiced identifying characters, settings, problems, solutions, and events related to the plot in fiction texts. They found the main idea and supporting details in nonfiction texts. They also became familiar with terms such as beginning, middle, end, author, illustrator, and photographer. Having an understanding of these terms allowed students to discuss what they read at a deeper level.

Once the three conditions had been met, I could begin the intervention. On the day prior to the start of the intervention, I conducted the Rigby PM Benchmark Kit assessment with each student in the focus group. This provided me with a comprehension score for each student and allowed me to observe the strategies that students were using to gain meaning from a text.

On the following day I introduced the concept of quick-shares to the class who received the intervention. I announced that a new and exciting activity would take place at the end of SSR. Instead of putting the reading materials away and transitioning into the next activity, each student would have the opportunity to talk briefly about what he/she read with a partner. To prepare students, I reminded them that good readers think about what they read and use reading strategies to help them understand what the author is saying.

After approximately fifteen minutes, I asked students to stop reading, choose one of the books they had read that day, and bring that book up front on the carpet. Once students had reconvened into a large group, I let them know that this would be when quick-shares would happen. Partnerships were randomly formed from names picked out of a cup and students
situated themselves into pairs. These partnerships remained the same throughout the intervention.

On this day, partners got one minute to share about what they enjoyed or disliked about the book they chose. I provided a guideline by modeling what the quick-share might look and sound like. I showed the front cover of a picture book and pointed out the title, author, and illustrator. I shared why I enjoyed this book. I had some extra time, so I shared my favorite part. I encouraged students to do the same if they finished early. I gave students thirty seconds to close their eyes and organize their thoughts. I then set the timer for one minute and the first partner started sharing while the other listened. When the timer sounded, the partners switched roles. Once the timer had sounded a second time, I directed students’ attention back to the large group. I pointed out some of the positive things I had observed during the quick-share, including the use of eye contact and staying on topic while sharing. Students were then instructed to clean up and the class transitioned into the next activity.

The second day of the intervention followed a similar routine. However, on this day students were asked to choose a fiction book to read so that the focus of the quick-shares could be on story elements. At the end of SSR time, students met up front with their partner and the book they had chosen. I let them know that the day’s discussions would center on the five basic story elements we had been working on. These elements were: characters, setting, events, problem, and solution. I again provided a model for students using a familiar picture book. I showed the front cover, stated the title, and pointed out the author and illustrator. As I discussed each story element, I referred to the retelling poster hanging on the chalkboard (See Appendix B). After I finished modeling, students were given thirty seconds to organize their thoughts, then participated in their second quick-share.
The focus of day three’s quick-shares was on nonfiction books. When SSR time ended, students met up front where I modeled how to summarize and share facts from a nonfiction text. I began by highlighting the title, author, and photographer. I then shared the main idea and some related facts I had read. I also shared some questions I had about the topic that were not answered in the text. Once I had finished, I gave students thirty seconds to organize their thoughts and then let them begin their discussions.

On the fourth day of the intervention, students were asked to choose a book and make either a text-to-self or a text-to-text connection. Prior to the start of SSR, we discussed what these terms meant and I provided some examples of both types of connections. When the class regrouped at the end of SSR, I modeled what students’ quick-shares might look and sound like for both fiction and nonfiction texts. Students were then given thirty seconds to organize their thoughts and participated in their quick-shares.

The second week followed a similar format. Each day the students participated in SSR for approximately fifteen minutes, and then met up front for quick-shares. During this week, I again modeled the four types of discussions that were introduced in the first week of the intervention. The focus of each day’s quick-shares was on the type of discussion I had reviewed.

During the third and fourth weeks of the intervention, students’ were able to choose the focus for their quick-share. I placed a list of the four different types of discussions on the chalkboard (See Appendix C). Each day, I quickly reviewed the different types, had students choose one type as their focus, and let students independently engage in quick-shares.

At the conclusion of the intervention, I again conducted the Rigby PM Benchmark Kit assessment with each student in the focus group.
FINDINGS OF DATA ANALYSIS

The pre and post intervention reading levels of the eight targeted students were obtained through the Rigby PM Benchmark Kit assessment. The majority of students were able to read one reading level higher post intervention regardless of whether they were in the treatment or control group. One student remained at the same reading level both pre and post intervention (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Comparison of Pre and Post Intervention Reading Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Pre Intervention Reading Level</th>
<th>Post Intervention Reading Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the intervention I also recorded my thoughts and observations about the targeted students’ engagement in SSR and their willingness to participate in quick-shares. I then compared these notes to my pre intervention observations and my past experiences with students during SSR.

Pre Intervention Observations of Engagement during SSR

My pre intervention observations were similar for all eight of the targeted students. These observations also correlated with the observations I noted about SSR time in previous years.

A majority of the time students were on task, although occasional breaks were taken to converse with a neighboring student. At times these brief conversations were about a book that
was being read, while other times the conversations were not related to reading. When students were reading they used their fingers to track print and used strategies such as picture clues, phonics, and asking for help to decode unknown words. However, when asked questions about what they were reading a common reply from some of the students was “I don’t know” or “I forgot”. The students would then flip back through the pages of the book in hopes of finding the answer. It seemed that some of these students were spending their time reading the words in a book, but were not using the comprehension strategies they had been taught to gain meaning from those words. Other students seemed to have some understanding of what they had read but replied that they did not know because they were unsure of how to discuss the text.

Post Intervention Observations of Engagement during SSR

After the intervention, the students in both the control group and the treatment group continued to demonstrate behaviors during SSR similar to those noted prior to the intervention. A majority of the time students were on task, they tracked print with their fingers, and they used strategies to help decode unknown words.

Students in the control group responded to questions asked about what they were reading in a similar manner to those noted prior to the intervention. In the treatment group, however, some changes were observed. When asked questions about what they were reading, all four targeted students flipped back through the pages of the book but used the pictures as a support rather than a way to find answers. One of the students told about the events using sequential words such as first, then, and last. Two other students opened the book, looked at a few pages, and then gave a summary of what happened. One other student flipped through the pages, closed the book, and then retold what happened.
Observations of *Quick-Shares*

Throughout the intervention, the target students as well as the rest of the class were willing to participate in *quick-shares*. Over the course of the four weeks, only three reminders were given to select partnerships to continue their discussion.

Partners sat in close proximity to one another. They made eye contact and interacted during the discussion. They also used literacy terms as they shared about their book. The following excerpts were taken from some of the conversations I heard during the *quick-shares*:

- “It takes place…”
- “I like the ending part.”
- “This was about…”
- “The characters are…”
- “They solved the problem by…”
- “The author is…”
- “I didn’t realize that…”

During the *quick-shares* two students consistently used the five finger retelling poster posted on the chalkboard to guide their discussion. The students also helped support each other by asking questions.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Three conclusions can be drawn from the results of this study. First, the results support the findings that adding a conversation component during SSR time provides an opportunity for students to develop their ability to discuss a text. In studies by Parr and Maguiness (2005) and Hobbs (1989) it was found that students were able to reflect more deeply on their reading
selections when they engaged in literate conversations. In this study, the students who participated in quick-shares were more confident and willing to discuss what they had read. When asked to discuss what they had read, the students began sharing immediately. They seemed to know how to communicate the main ideas of a text in an effective manner.

Second, the results support the claim that having a time to discuss reading is enjoyable for students. The students in the treatment classroom looked forward to the quick-shares. They were eager to have a time to talk and share about what they had read. Many students also commented that sharing was one of their favorite things about SSR time.

Finally, the results from this study do not support the claim that initiating literate conversations among students can increase reading comprehension. Similar gains in both the control group and the treatment group can most likely be attributed to maturation of the students and continued exposure to literacy rather than the use of quick-shares. In Kelley and Clausen-Grace’s (2006) study, however, it was seven months before comprehension gains were seen (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). If this study had been extended over a longer period of time different results may have been seen.

FUTURE PLANS

Due to the benefits that were seen, I plan to continue the use of quick-shares in my classroom and improve upon my implementation. In future years I would like to spend more time introducing each type of quick-share. Rather than introducing all four types in one week I would like to focus intensely on one form at a time. Once I am confident that students are able to independently engage in the focus type of quick-share I would then introduce the next form. In
addition, I plan to continue to expand my classroom library to include a variety of titles from a wide range of genres.

I also plan on sharing the concept of quick-shares with my colleagues. This may cause new insights and suggestions to arise that will make incorporating a conversation component during SSR even more beneficial. Having a support system will help me develop as an educator and get me closer to the ultimate goal of having every student succeed in reading.
REFERENCES


This story takes place at bedtime, and the names of the people in it are Sam and Mom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mom said, &quot;Go to bed, Sam.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>&quot;I can not go to bed,&quot; said Sam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Little Bear is not in bed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where is he?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sam looked and looked for Little Bear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mom looked and looked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for Little Bear, too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>&quot;Where is Little bear?&quot; said Sam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Where is he?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;He is not in here,&quot; said Mom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sam and Mom looked in the box.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>&quot;Little Bear is not in the box,&quot; said Sam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Look, Mom! Here he is!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>&quot;Go to bed, Little Bear,&quot; said Mom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Come on, Little Bear,&quot; said Sam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Come to bed.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Sam and Little Bear went to sleep.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total
Level 5: Sam and little Bear

Assessment Record

Name: ____________________________

Analysis Of retelling (meaning, main ideas, coherence, vocabulary, reference to text)

Questions to Check for Understanding (check if understanding acceptable)

1. Where did Sam and Mom look for Little Bear?
   Response: □

2. Where did they find Little Bear?
   Response: □

3. What might have happened if they hadn't found Little Bear?
   Response: □

Reading level

Accuracy level: _______ = 1: ______ = %

Self-correction rate: ______ = _____ = 1:

Reading level (with understanding): Easy / Instructional / Hard

Analysis Of reading behaviors (print concepts, meaning cues, structural cues, visual information, self-monitoring, self-correcting, fluency, expression)

Recommendations:

Teacher; Date benchmark assessment completed:

Assessment Record 0 Rigby
APPENDIX B

5 Finger Retelling

- Setting
- Problem
- Events 1st, 2nd
- Solution
- Characters
APPENDIX C

Quick-Shares Choices

1. Talk about what I like or didn’t like.

2. Discuss the Story Elements.

3. Tell the Main Idea and Interesting Facts.

4. Talk about Connections to yourself or to another book.