

**Teacher Read-Alouds at 2nd Grade, With and Without Student Companion Texts:
Unexpected Findings**

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Purpose

Using an experimental research design, this project investigated the effects of teacher read-alouds when 2nd grade students did, and did not, have access to companion texts. Within this broad question, three specific research questions were posed: (1) How are students' reading achievement gains, as measured by the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) (Burns and Roe, 2002), affected by a 12 week intervention of teacher read-alouds when students do and do not have access to companion texts?, (2) How are students' story comprehension scores, as measured teacher-made assessments, affected during a 12 week intervention of teacher read-alouds when students do and do not have access to companion texts?, and (3) How are students' vocabulary scores, as measured by teacher-made assessments, affected during a 12 week intervention of teacher read-alouds when students do and do not have access to companion texts?

Perspectives/ Theoretical Rationale.

The study of teacher read-alouds when students do and do not have access to companion texts can be framed from multiple theoretical perspectives (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). A connectionist theoretical perspective (Adams, 1990; Plaut & McClelland, 1993) was chosen for the current project. This cognitive, theoretical perspective suggests that students' reading achievement may be more positively affected when using a companion text during teacher-read alouds than when just listening to teacher read-alouds. According to connectionism, each time a student simultaneously sees a word in a text and hears the teacher say it, a cognitive connection between the image of the word and the sound of the word is formed and/or strengthened in the child's brain. These strengthened connections then lead to faster word identification and more fluent reading on subsequent exposures. Hypothetically, if these pairings occur hundreds and hundreds of times, as would be the case during months of teacher read-alouds when students are using companion texts, increased reading ability among these students would result. The current project was designed to test this hypothesis.

Background

Read-alouds gained recognition as a significant instructional approach that could affect children's literacy achievement after the Commission on Reading published *Becoming A Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) which included the now famous quote, "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p. 23). Since then, the frequency of teacher read-alouds in classrooms has steadily increased (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002). Brabham and Lynch-Brown reported that thirty to forty years ago less than half of elementary teachers regularly read aloud to their students. In contrast, they reported that ten to twenty years ago approximately 75% of all elementary teachers read aloud daily to their students. Recently, Jacobs, Morrison, and Swinyard (2000) found that 100% of elementary teachers

reported reading aloud to their students on a regular basis. Although teacher read-alouds occur less frequently at the middle-school level than at the elementary school level (Albright, 2002), middle-school students indicate that being read to by their teachers is one of their favorite literacy activities (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

Given the frequency with which reading aloud has been implemented, a fairly robust body of literature exists. For example, many studies have investigated the effects of reading aloud on students' literacy skills. Read-alouds have been found to positively impact students' vocabulary acquisition and comprehension (Butler, 1998; Cohen, 1988; Dennis & Walter, 1995; Hall, 1987; Meyer, Stahl, Wardop, & Linn, 1994; Ouellette, Dagostino, & Carifio, 1999). It has also been reported that the frequency with which preschoolers listen to read-alouds correlated with their knowledge of books (Ulanoff & Pucci, 1999). Others have found positive relationships between read-alouds and children's oral language development (Crawford & Hade, 2000). Feitelson, Kita, and Goldstein (1986) showed a positive relationship between read-alouds and letter-sound relationships, and Feitelson, Goldstein, and Share (1993) showed positive relationships between read-alouds and children's understanding of print and speech relationships. Research on the basic effects of read-alouds has also been deepened by studies that examine differences between read-aloud styles (Snow, 1983; Pellegrini, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Sigel, 1986; Pelligrini, Perlmutter, Galda, & Brody, 1990; Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, Angell, Smith, & Fischel, 1994). Although Yaden, Rowe, and MacGillivray (2000) concluded that no single approach to read-alouds has been identified as ideal, Beck and McKeown (2001) reported that actively involving students in story-book reading using language promotion strategies leads to more effective read-aloud experiences.

One variation of read-alouds that is beginning to get research attention is the effects of teacher read-alouds when students use, and do not use, companion texts. Two pilot studies have been completed on this topic (Burgess & Tracey, 2006; Militante, 2006). Burgess and

Tracey (2006) investigated the effects of teacher read-alouds on 18 fourth grade students who used and didn't use companion texts. While no main effects were found for use of the companion texts on comprehension and vocabulary measures, significant interaction effects were found for order. For both measures, when read-alouds without a companion text were followed by read-alouds with a companion text, significantly better comprehension and vocabulary performances were observed for the companion text condition. The same pattern was observed by Militante (2006). While results from these studies are promising, both took place within very brief time periods, about six weeks, and neither addressed students' achievement gains during the duration of the project. The present study was designed to extend the existing knowledge base in this emerging line of research.

Methodology

Subjects. Twenty, Caucasian second graders from one classroom in a NJ suburban, elementary school were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. The "Condition A" (Companion Text) group received companion texts to use during the teacher read-alouds while the "Condition B" (Listen Only) group did not receive the texts. An examination of pre-test scores indicated that there were no significant differences in reading ability between the two groups, as measured by the *Informal Reading Inventory* (IRI) (Burns & Roe, 2002). Based on the IRI, students' reading abilities ranged from pre-primer to third grade based at the outset of the project.

Materials. Six, second grade trade books were read aloud to the students over the period of 12 weeks: *The Case of the Missing Pumpkins* (Star, 2004), *Stanley, Flat Again* (Brown, 2003), *A Spy in the White House* (Roy, 2004), *The Absent Author* (Roy, 1997), *Marvin Redpost: Why Pick on Me?* (Sachar, 1993), and *Afternoon on the Amazon* (Osborne, 1995).

Data Sources. The IRI (Burns & Roe, 2002) was used as a pre-and post-test to measure reading achievement gains during the intervention. Additionally, two teacher-made

comprehension tests (one at the middle of each book and one at the end of each book) and two teacher-made vocabulary tests (one at the middle of each book and one at the end of each book) were given for all texts. Each comprehension test was composed of fill-in-the-blank questions designed to assess literal and inferential story comprehension. Each matching vocabulary test assessed words highlighted by the teacher during the read-alouds.

Procedure. Following the random assignment and pre-testing described above, students listened to teacher read-alouds after lunch for fifteen minutes a day, three times a week, for 12 weeks. All students simultaneously heard the teacher read-aloud, although students holding the companion texts sat on one side of the classroom rug while students without companion texts sat on the other.

The teacher read-alouds were designed to be as high-quality as possible, based on existing research. The classroom teacher built and activated students' background knowledge prior to reading, asked literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension questions during and after reading, and highlighted important vocabulary words. Importantly, students with companion texts were *not* coached or reminded to carefully attend to the books during the read-alouds. Assessments were given as described above.

Results. Results of independent t-tests indicated that students in the Listen Only group had significantly greater reading achievement gains following the 12-week intervention than students in the Companion Text group ($t=2.13, p<.05$). Analyses of the comprehension and vocabulary measures did not reveal significant differences between the two groups.

Discussion. This study investigated the effects of teacher-read alouds in 2nd grade when students did, and did not, have access to companion texts. Contrary to expectations based on connectionist theory, (Adams, 1990; Plaut & McClelland, 1993), findings revealed that students in the Listen Only group significantly outperformed students in the Companion Text group on the measure of reading achievement gains. The importance of this finding is

underscored by the small group size examined. That is, the smaller the sample size, the less likely it is to find significant differences between groups. That a significant difference was found between the two groups in this small sample suggests that differences in student gains between the two groups did, in fact, exist.

One possible explanation for the unexpected finding is that students in the companion text group may have actually been distracted by the presence of their books. In support of this interpretation, the classroom teacher reported that students with access to the companion texts were often seen flipping through the pages of the book, looking at pictures or possibly trying to read ahead, during the teacher read-alouds. In contrast, in the teacher's judgment, students in the Listen Only group appeared much more focused on listening as the teacher read. If this interpretation is correct, then the Connectionist Theory would not have been applicable in this study since students with access to the text were not consistently experiencing the auditory and visual pairings that predictably would have led to improved reading achievement.

Educational Significance

Although many studies have investigated varied aspects of teacher read-alouds in the classroom, to date, no published study has compared the effects of teacher read-alouds with and without student companion texts on students' reading achievement gains. While anticipated findings based on connectionist theory were not found, important insights for the development of this line of research were revealed. First, it appears that to fully examine this issue, young children must be explicitly, and perhaps repeatedly, reminded to look at the words in their books during the reads aloud, since the present project suggests that 2nd grade students do not spontaneously do this. Second, the findings from this study, in contrast to previous work (Burgess & Tracey, 2006), indicate that there may be important grade level differences in the application of this technique in the classroom. Burgess and Tracey found that when working with 4th graders, significant interaction effects for order favoring the companion text condition

were reported for both comprehension and vocabulary book-related assessments. Furthermore, no indications of distractions related to book use were reported in the 4th grade study.

Teacher read-alouds in the classroom are one of the most frequently used and frequently recommended educational practices for promoting students' literacy growth (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Trelease, 1989; Wan, 2000). Consequently, it is imperative that procedures for yielding optimal outcomes of the practice are identified. The present study provides meaningful directions for furthering an emerging line of research within this important instructional arena.

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