

Teacher Read-Alouds with and without Student Companion Texts: Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

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Purpose.

This study investigated the effects of teacher read-alouds, with and without student companion texts, on students' reading performance during a four-month intervention. Linking to the conference theme, it was hypothesized that the use of companion texts during the teacher read-alouds would make literacy success more accessible for the subjects, students from a low SES, Hispanic community.

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework.

In a now classic statement, Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) found that the practice of read-alouds is, "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (p. 23). Since then, the frequency of teacher read-alouds in classrooms has steadily increased (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002), and benefits of read-alouds have been reported at preschool, elementary, and middle school levels.

Benefits of read-alouds for preschool students include vocabulary acquisition and the development of the ability to make meaning from stories (Leung, 2008; Senechal, 1993). Repeated read-alouds in which preschoolers are actively engaged are particularly effective (Leung, 2008; Senechal, Thomas, & Monker, 1995).

At the elementary level, Beck and McKeown (2001), referred to read-alouds as, "the most highly recommended activity for encouraging language and literacy" (p.10). Greater vocabulary development is associated with elementary students' active engagement in read-alouds (Beck & McKeown, 2001). In addition, teacher read-alouds have been found to correlate with elementary students' comprehension development, and growth in background knowledge, listening skills, and attitudes towards reading (Baker, Chard, & Edwards, 2002; Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004; Jacobs, Morrison, & Swinyard, 2000; and Santoro, Chard, Howard & Baker, 2008).

Albright and Ariail (2005) reported that the National Commission on Reading urged teachers to continue reading aloud through all grades. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) surveyed 1,700 sixth graders and found that read-alouds were one of the most preferred reading activities in school. Albright (2002) and Jacobs, Morrison, and Swinyard (2000) advocated the read-aloud of picture books with middle school students as it, “contributes to students’ store of knowledge and promotes personal growth and social response, as well as introduces students to different types of text structure” (Albright, 2002, p. 419).

The present study of teacher read-alouds is framed from a Connectionist theoretical perspective (Adams, 1990). According to Connectionism, each time a student simultaneously sees and hears a word, a cognitive connection between the image of the word and the sound of the word is formed and/or strengthened in the reader’s brain. Hypothetically, if these pairings occur thousands of times, as would be the case during a prolonged period of teacher read-alouds when students are using companion texts, it would lead to improved reading performance in these students. Thus, the present study was designed to investigate the research question: “What are the effects on students’ reading performance when students use, versus do not use, companion texts during teachers’ read-alouds?” Based on Connectionism, it was hypothesized that students in the companion text condition would outperform students in the listen-only condition.

Methods.

Subjects.

This study was situated in a small, northeast community cited as housing the highest Costa Rican population in the United States. The community struggles with the challenges familiar to other non-mainstream, immigrant populations including language barriers and low family incomes. The project was implemented in a school housing approximately 300 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students. Approximately 80% of the students live in homes in which English is the second language. A similar percentage receives free and reduced lunch support. The school environment is generally warm and positive. 168 students in 8 classrooms (four fourth grade classrooms, n=81, and four fifth grade classrooms, n=87) participated in this study.

Procedure.

Following IRB approval and permissions, and consistent with an experimental research design, students were randomly assigned to one of two conditions *within* classrooms: the “companion text” condition and the “listen only” condition. Students’ pre-test data were collected (see data sources below) and examined for pre-existing differences between the two groups. During the intervention phase, teachers read aloud to students from assigned, grade-level novels approximately three times per week, 20 minutes per day, for four months. During the read-alouds, students in the “companion text” condition used companion texts to follow along; students in the “listen-only” condition just listened. One novel per month was read in this manner during the Spring 2010 semester.

Data Sources

Quantitative. The pre-test and post-test data sources were those routinely used by the school district. These are the students' state, standardized reading proficiency scores on the NJASK, and students' scores on the individually administered, district mandated Developmental Reading Assessment, 2nd edition (DRA-2).

Qualitative. 16, Hispanic, fourth grade students were purposefully selected as subjects for the qualitative portion of this study: four high performing students (two in each condition), four average performing students (two in each condition), four struggling students (two in each condition), and four students with special education inclusion classification (two in each condition). Classroom observations of each student (one per month) were collected using a 5-minute, interval-based, observation sheet, and individual student interviews were conducted at the end of the study. Each teacher was also interviewed at the end of the study. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which data are simultaneously collected and reflected upon, was used throughout the study.

Results, Conclusions and Interpretations.

Quantitative Findings. A series of independent t-tests was used to see if there were pre-test differences. For the NJASK, there was no significant pre-test difference between students using books ($M=197.45$, $SD=23.70$) and not using books ($M=189.95$, $SD=30.81$) ($t(168) = 1.78$, $p = .077$). For the DRA-2, there was a significant pre-test difference between students using books ($M=38.90$, $SD=11.20$) and not using books ($M=34.63$, $SD=13.53$), $t(171) = 2.26$, $p < .05$. Because there was an initial, statistically significant difference between groups, a Repeated Measures Multivariate ANOVA was used to examine the growth data for the two groups. Regarding the NJASK, there was no significant interaction between the growth on pre- and post-test scores and having a companion book or not, $F(1,166)=.005$, $p=.943$. Regarding the DRA-2, there was no significant interaction between the growth on pre- and post-test scores and having a companion book or not, $F(1,164)=.031$, $p=.860$.

Qualitative Findings. Observational data indicated that, although most students appeared to be engaged in the read-aloud experience, students with texts were less likely to be recorded as engaged in what appeared to be off-task, distracted behaviors such as looking out the window, playing with pencils, or interacting with classmates. The most commonly recorded behavior for students who had companion texts was, "steady tracking [of print]". These patterns were consistent regardless of students' reading ability or classification.

In the student interviews, students with and without companion texts both reported enjoying the read-aloud project. Students with companion texts reported enjoying following along in the text, while students without companion texts reported other positive experiences such as using imagination during the read-alouds. 100% of the students with the companion texts reported that they would participate again in the project. Three of the eight students who did not have a companion text said that they would only do the study again only if they were given a book next time.

Each of the four fourth grade teachers was interviewed regarding her perceptions of the read-aloud experience for students with and without companion texts. The teachers unanimously reported that, for general education students, students with companion texts appeared to better enjoy, better attend to, and better comprehend the read-alouds. One teacher reported that, in her opinion, the special education students with the companion texts seemed more distracted than did the special education students without the companion texts. The classroom observation data, however, did not corroborate this viewpoint.

Educational and/or Scientific Importance. The goal of this research was to investigate the effects of teacher read-alouds when students use, versus do not use, student companion texts during the read-alouds. Quantitative results indicated that no significant differences on two measures of reading growth were found. Qualitative data based on classroom observations, student interviews and teacher interviews revealed higher attention, enjoyment, and comprehension for students that used the companion texts during the teacher read-alouds. Thus, the qualitative results of this research study supported the research hypothesis although the quantitative results did not. Similarly, the quantitative data did not show support for the Connectionist Theory in this study. It is possible that quantitative differences between the two groups were not found because of the relatively short duration of the intervention. Future investigations could examine the same research question during a lengthier intervention. With regard to the conference theme, the qualitative results of this study suggest greater access to literacy success for the subjects who used companion texts during the teacher read-alouds.

Interest/ Connection to the LRA Audience. The practice of teachers reading aloud is one of the most frequently implemented and potentially impactful literacy activities in schools today. Instructional variations of this practice should be of high interest to the Literacy Research Association audience.

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