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Shifting from a Developmental Retelling Framework to Independent Reading and Retelling: Case Study

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Abstract: While practices such as think alouds, questioning, and summarization strategies have been shown through research to have promise for improving reading comprehension, these strategies may or may not be spontaneously used by students during independent reading. This study uses a qualitative case study design to explore how second grade students transferred a retelling for comprehension framework into their independent reading for understanding, with particular attention to the steps employed and support evidenced for higher level thinking. Theoretical concepts included transfer of learning and scaffolding. Study participants, selected using purposeful sampling, included 12 second grade students from two classes in a K-5 public school in Arizona. Data was collected through focus group interviews and documents that included student work in the form of Graphic Organizer (GO!) Journal and Shape GO! Map worksheets, which revealed student thinking about stories. Interpretational coding was used to uncover important themes. Study findings indicate that student responses changed after retelling instruction suggesting that students were able to transfer the framework. Findings also indicate that students engaged in higher level thinking through connections, comparisons, and assertions made within the framework's elements. Implications for social change include change in teaching practice, which could provide second grade students a tool that builds reading comprehension and is transferable to individual reading.

Keywords: Retelling, Reading Comprehension, Transfer of Learning

Introduction

Reading comprehension is an essential skill for children. Children who learn to read in the early grades may come to enjoy reading and learning throughout their schooling career and beyond. Creating lifelong readers may be one goal that teachers have for their students but the ability to read and comprehend may be most critical when one considers that in many cases reading is the vehicle for learning content in other subject areas. Students may find that difficulties in reading comprehension also interfere with comprehension of math, science, or social studies content that is accessed by way of the textbook.

According to the most recent RAND Reading Study Group (2002) report on reading comprehension, the level of reading skills of students in the United States and comprehension instruction were among two of the issues that prompted the group's research agenda proposal in reading published in 2002. The RAND Reading Study Group summed up years of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, which assesses students in the U.S. from grades 4, 8, and 12 in reading and other subjects, by stating that "with few exceptions, indicators of achievement in states and school districts have shown no or only slow growth across grades in

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the past ten years." Perhaps this finding is less surprising in light of RAND's additional claim that comprehension instruction in the U.S., for the most part is, minimal and ineffective."

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore transfer of a retelling for comprehension framework (Benson & Cummins, 2000) from whole group to independent reading with second grade students at a public elementary school in Arizona. Retelling is generally defined as a learner's construction of meaning from a text and the retelling for comprehension process uses graphic organizers to help students organize and analyze story events (Benson & Cummins). How students use the framework in their independent reading can give insight to teachers working with more fluent readers who need to focus on understanding what has been read.

Research Questions

This study focused on the following questions:

1. How do second grade students transfer a retelling for comprehension framework, intended for whole group work, to their independent reading?
2. What steps from the retelling for comprehension framework do students tend to use?
3. How does the retelling for comprehension framework support higher level thinking in second grade students?

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was used for this research study. Qualitative research is initiated in a natural setting so that the researcher sees the phenomenon in its normal context rather than in isolation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus Lincoln and Guba termed qualitative research naturalistic inquiry and considered the researcher as a human instrument for data collection. The researcher collects data in the way of language and pictures that are analyzed inductively (Creswell, 1998).

The case study design was chosen for this study with the case being second graders' transfer of a retelling for comprehension framework (Benson & Cummins, 2000) from whole group, during read alouds, to independent reading. This design was believed to be appropriate because this study sought to explore how students used the framework in their independent reading. Yin (2002) justified the use of case studies to answer how and why questions because they explain phenomena studied over a period of time.

Study participants included two groups of second grade students with six students in each group. Each group of six students was made up of two students at, below, and above grade level in reading comprehension, as measured by students' most recent STAR Reading Assessment (STAR, 2009). The researcher was responsible for second grade teachers' professional

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development in using the retelling for comprehension framework (Benson & Cummins, 2000), obtaining permissions, and conducting all data collection and analysis.

Data collection included focus group interviews of both groups at the start and end of the study and documents in the way of participants' Graphic Organizer (GO!) Journal and Shape GO! Map worksheets (Benson & Cummins, 2000). The focus group interview was chosen as a data collection strategy because it allowed the researcher to understand participant knowledge about how to think about stories before being exposed to retelling and to understand how participants' thinking and understanding might have changed after using the retelling for comprehension process. Additionally, participant responses revealed the steps in the retelling for comprehension process framework participants used as well as how the framework supported higher level thinking based on participant responses in which they generated questions, alternative thinking, or solutions; discussed feelings; or were able to look at issues from the perspectives of others.

Students completed the GO! Journal worksheet by recording their story predictions, vocabulary predictions, understandings, interpretations, and connections. The elements that are a part of the GO! Journal are exactly the same elements found in the GO! Chart, which the teacher used to explicitly teach the retelling for comprehension framework. Thus use of the GO! Journal is an indicator as to whether or not participants transferred the whole group taught framework to their independent reading and it also revealed student thinking, questioning, analysis, and understanding.

An interpretive analysis approach was used in the data analysis process, which is the technique of segmenting and categorizing meaningful units of data for coding (Tesch, 1990; Wolcott, 1994). First, the researcher segmented all data to include interview responses and responses from documents, which included the GO! Journal and Shape GO! Map worksheets into relevant parts. Then the researcher coded the data by sorting it into categories. Coding allowed the the researcher to do the following.

1. Compare the interviews at the start and end of the retelling instruction to look for changes in interview responses.
2. Notice if and how students transferred retelling in independent reading.
3. Identify evidence of higher level thinking.
4. Identify relevant student responses to stories read independently.

Data method triangulation and thick description were used used to ensure study quality. Data from focus group interviews and documents, which included individual GO! Journals and Shape GO! Maps were triangulated. Triangulation allows the researcher to corroborate one data source with another (Creswell, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2003). Thick description is used to report the case so that a detailed description of the case is presented. (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

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Retelling

Benson and Cummins (2000) contended that retelling is more than just story recall; rather it is the ability to construct meaning. Benson and Cummins further explained that in order for students to construct meaning, they would need certain tools. Schema is one of those tools. Schema is the knowledge that a child brings to a learning situation and Benson and Cummins referred to schema as a child's "backpack" and explained that it is "developed from a child's interactions with the world. This knowledge is a storehouse of facts, beliefs, feelings, and attitudes about how the child perceives that things work."

Language is another critical tool in Benson and Cummins's (2000) retelling model since it is used to convey thinking and understanding. In the developmental model, language needs are addressed through both surface structure and deep structure. Students use both in retelling. First they use deep structure as they come up with ideas and thoughts about a story. They use surface structure as they communicate those thoughts and ideas through oral and written language.

Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory is integral to Benson and Cummins's (2000) retelling model for teaching comprehension. Vygotsky explained the role social interaction plays:

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formulation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals.

Thus social interaction in retelling allows students to bring their experiences through schema to the story as well as to learn from the background knowledge of others, which gives students an opportunity to begin building meaning at the beginning and throughout the story.

Second graders in this study engaged in the retelling for comprehension process at the story map retelling level. It is at this level that students were also introduced to the GO! Chart and Shape GO! Map. The GO! Chart consists of a large sheet of butcher or chart paper divided into six columns. The columns are labeled Predictions, Vocabulary, Understandings, Interpretations, Connections, and Retelling (Benson & Cummins, 2000). The GO! Chart can be used with whole groups, as is the case in this study, or with small groups. The chart is used with one story and according to Benson and Cummins it can be completed in one day or over the course of several days. In this study the chart was completed over a four day period with activities as follows.

On Day 1 students made predictions. First predictions were based on the title alone and written on the chart. Next students saw the cover and continued to make predictions that were added to the chart. Next the teacher asked students to predict words that might be in the story. Students were told that small words like *the, is, a, and, what,* and *at* are in all stories and would not be added to the chart. Students justified adding the word to the vocabulary section of the chart so as to teach students that the words they choose should be connected to the story. The teacher then

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added two or three words that were essential to story meaning and then explained their meaning to students. Next the teacher read the story aloud. Afterwards the teacher guided a discussion about story events. Lastly the students and teacher confirmed predictions and story vocabulary predictions.

Day 2 began with a review of vocabulary that the teacher added on day one and then a rereading of the story. Next the students helped fill out the understanding and interpretations sections of the chart. The understandings were details students noticed in the story and the interpretations were details students wondered about. The teacher also guided an oral retelling of story events and student guided discussion took place either after or during the time students were sharing their understandings and interpretations.

On Day 3 students reviewed vocabulary, retold the story orally, and made connections under the connections section of the chart. Here the students were asked what the story reminded them of such as another story, people they know, their own lives, or a similar situation. Students had to give the connection between the story and their response so that students learned to make logical connections. Any student guided discussion can take place about the story or the connections and the teacher may pose questions about important issues that were not brought up during previous discussions.

Day 4 involved the Shape Go! Map and the shapes- triangle for beginning, rectangle for middle, and circle for end were drawn under the retelling section of the chart. The students helped fill in the information that went with each of the shapes and the result was a retelling of the story in sequential order. The three points of the triangle stand for character, setting, and plot and the corresponding story information was written in each of these areas. The rectangle stands for the middle of the story and students tried to capture the story details in just three to four sentences so that the story is in sequential order (e.g. First, Next, and so on). The story's conclusion was written in the circle. Decisions about what goes on the Shape Go Map are made through discussion and group consensus.

After three weeks of whole group retelling with three different stories, students were given a GO! Journal which is a worksheet copy of the GO! Chart so that they could begin to address each of the chart sections with a story and the teacher could check for understanding through sharing and input of student responses on a larger chart. The whole group process at the beginning allowed for teacher modeling and guided practice by students in using the framework. By the third week the teacher began to nudge students to be more independent with the framework by giving students their own GO! Journal and Shape GO! Map, but still provided scaffolded support with discussion after students addressed each section of the chart during each story. After six weeks of retelling for comprehension with the GO! Chart and Shape GO! Map, students read a story on their own and used the GO! Journal and Shape GO! Map during their reading process.

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Findings

Analysis of focus group interviews before and after retelling instruction as well as the Go! Journal and Shape GO! Map documents shows that second grade participants were not only capable of learning the retelling for comprehension (Benson & Cummins, 2000) framework but also of transferring that framework in whole or in part to their independent reading. Analysis of the first focus group interview showed that participants could make predictions but did not use story facts to support whether or not their predictions were accurate. Participants noted understandings and interpretations by telling what they noticed or wondered about but these understandings and interpretations were not always relevant to the story plot. Participant connections were personal, as participants did not relate the story to anything outside of their personal lives.

In comparison, the second focus group interview revealed that participants were making detailed predictions that had a sense of story. Participants were also able to tell whether or not their prediction was correct and use story facts to support responses. The researcher noticed that although the number of participant understandings or what participants noticed about stories remained unchanged, participants were making more interpretations that were related to the story plot. Participants also began to make connections outside of their personal lives.

Analysis of GO! Journal and Shape GO! Map worksheets showed that participants, with the exception of one below grade level in reading comprehension, were able to transfer the retelling for comprehension (Benson & and Cummins, 2000) framework to their independent reading. Participants made story and vocabulary predictions and there was some evidence of participants using their story predictions to predict vocabulary. The researcher could see that participants were making more interpretations that were related to the story plot although some interpretations in the form of "I wonder…" statements were either answered implicitly or explicitly in the story. The above realization led the researcher to conclude that participants could benefit from instruction in making inferences, a skill that is taught in the second grade according to the Arizona Department of Education Academic Standards for reading comprehension (ADE, 2009). The researcher also noticed a change in connections participants made, as they began making connections to other texts as well as the outside world. In using the Shape GO! Map, participants, noted characters, setting, and plot; as well as events or details; and story conclusion.

The researcher found evidence of higher level thinking in participant responses according to Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) categories within the cognitive process. Participants showed higher level thinking in using the *Understand*, *Apply*, and *Analyze* processes in responses that made comparisons or differentiations, and in applying the framework during independent reading. The retelling for comprehension (Benson & Cummins, 2000) framework supported higher level thinking in second graders because the framework learned and used in whole group instruction can be applied to many other stories to construct meaning. In using the framework, participants were tasked with noticing details and generating questions, which resulted in their making comparisons, differentiations, evaluations, and connections. The framework supports

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high level thinking because students are forced to do the thinking, as they respond to the framework's elements.

Implications for Social Change

This study has social change implications at a broad spectrum level as well as a more specific level. Broadly, this study will add to a limited literature base on retelling as a comprehension strategy. Although some literature exists on using retelling, there is little research on this strategy. This research study may result in further exploration of retelling by other researchers and give way to new possibilities for reading comprehension instruction.

Thanks to the work of Bruner (1960/2003) and others (Mestre, 2005 & Engle, 2006) in transfer of learning, much is known about the critical role transfer plays in new learning. This study shows how transfer can occur as second grade students apply knowledge of organizing and analyzing stories, through whole group instruction, to the stories they read independently. This study also shows that transfer can occur even in part for students and this may lead to future studies on maximizing transfer for students or on strategies that are optimal for transfer to take place.

There is also the potential for this study to change teaching practice. The two teachers, whose students participated in this study, had an opportunity to see the influence of a retelling for comprehension framework on student thinking and responses about stories. The teachers now have knowledge of a powerful strategy that can be used not only with the current group of students but also with students in classes for years to come. Furthermore these teachers, with their knowledge of retelling, also have an opportunity to influence other teachers in their school and district.

The retelling for comprehension (Benson & Cummins, 2000) framework has social change implications for the classroom as well. Having a framework for thinking about and comprehending stories gives all students access to comprehension and thus an opportunity to be successful. This study has shown that the retelling framework is not a strategy for a few select individuals; rather it can be used by students with reading comprehension levels above, at, and below grade level. Comprehension is about making meaning out of what has been read (RAND Report, 2002) and texts even at different reading levels carry a message for the reader to explore and unlock. Thus the retelling framework can be useful for readers of different levels, as they apply it to many other stories and strengthen their comprehension skills.

Summary

This qualitative case study explored how second graders transfer a whole group retelling for comprehension (Benson & Cummins, 2000) framework to independent reading. Study findings showed that students were able to transfer, even in part, the retelling framework to their independent reading, as participants responded to focus group interview questions related to the framework and used components of the GO! Journal and Shape GO! Maps independently to

show their understanding of stories. Implications for social change extend from the classroom, where retelling can affect student comprehension to the research community, where the study can contribute to research and be a starting point for additional studies.

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