

Have they pinched it from another newspaper?

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This article presents an intervention study where two conditions of reading instruction are compared. In a base condition four teachers—two in the experimental groups and two in the control groups—and their students in grade 5 discuss newspaper texts during a regular lesson. The majority of the students were poor comprehenders.

In the intervention condition, the teachers in the experimental groups used a model of structured text talk, Questioning the Author (QtA), after repeatedly having participated in seminars led by the investigators where the model was practised. During the regular lessons the four teachers mostly asked questions to check if the students know the meaning of difficult words. The students made few inferences and reflections.

During the QtA lessons the teachers' question types had undergone a change. There was a dramatical increase in the number of inference- and half-open questions and the students made numerous inferences, reflections and initiated own questions. This was not the case in the control groups.

INTRODUCTION

Studies concerning children's reading comprehension have shown that many of them often read texts passively, i.e. on the text surface and not between the lines. Students' passivity may among other things be due to their belief that texts are written above criticism and that they are not allowed to question the author behind the text. Consequently many poor readers tend to blame themselves when they do not understand—only rarely do they blame the authors.

Every text, however, requires that the reader, in order to make meaning from it, penetrates beneath the surface of the text and fills in the gaps in the writer's train of thought (Lundberg, 2002). Research has demonstrated the need of instruction, like structured text talks if students' reading comprehension is to be improved. Unfortunately, the field has not been in focus for educational research in Sweden in recent years. In other parts of the world, however, a great deal of research is to be found. There are several models for structured text talks e.g. Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) and Questioning the Author (henceforth QtA) (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan & Worthy, 1996).

Descriptions of how students can learn through participation in collaborative discussions led by an adult can be traced to Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962).

The overall aim of this study was to investigate to what extent—if any—a new approach of comprehension instruction, QtA (see below), changes teachers' and students' interaction with newspaper texts.

We focus on five questions, the first four being experimental in nature and the fifth one being explanatory in nature dealing with the importance of using newspaper texts, specifically in structured text talks.

1. *What types of questions do teachers typically and regularly ask when discussing newspaper texts under typical or regular classroom conditions?*
2. *What strategies do teachers typically and regularly use to get the students to interact actively with the texts?*
3. *How do students regularly respond to these questions?*
4. *Can structured text talks change: teachers' question types, students' answers, teachers' and students' strategies and poor comprehenders' participation in text talks?*
5. *How do teachers and students view newspaper texts as a genre?*

Using media of any kind as instructional material is a given for some teachers but not for all. According to the national curriculum guidelines (Lpo 94), the use of media shall be included in the school's mission to, among other things, prepare the students to act in society, orient themselves in the heavy flow of information, be able to critically scrutinise facts and issues, as well as develop their communication skills. Media are also in general important agents of socialisation from relatively early childhood (e.g. Sundin, 2004).

An overview of media literacy and media instruction shows that media can be used in at least three ways in school: As teaching materials, where the medium is viewed as an instructional tool; as a mode of expression, where students learn to produce their own media, for example creating a school paper or making a movie; or as the object of critical media literacy, where the purpose of the teaching is that the students learn about the conditions, contents and consequences of the media in order to become critical consumers of media (Fogelberg, 2005).

QUESTIONING THE AUTHOR

In QtA the text is viewed as the product of a human author who is potentially fallible. Armed with this view, students can view texts as less impersonal, authoritative, and incomprehensible, and realize that texts are open-ended and

incomplete and that as readers, they have to contribute something to complete it, for instance by asking the author hypothetical questions. QtA deals with the text through teacher-posed author-oriented queries, such as “What is the author trying to say” and “What do you think the author means by that?” The purpose of these queries is to assist students in their efforts to understand when they are reading a text the first time.

QtA takes place on-line, reading segments of the text and discussing the ideas and events encountered. The teachers have segmented the text in advance. The segmentations have been made where the students may be expected to have difficulties. The students stop reading in this place and collaborative construction of meaning is performed by questioning the author. Stopping to discuss an expository text also allows readers to consider different alternatives. Questioning begins by eliciting what the author says and what that actually means and how it connects with other text ideas. Thus, QtA encourages collaborative discussions in which students are forced to deal with text ideas in order to construct meaning. Wrestling with the expository text during reading gives students the opportunity to learn from one another, to question, and consider alternative possibilities, and to test their own ideas in a safe environment (Beck et al., 1996).

METHOD

Participants

Four groups of students, from four classes participated in the present study. Two of the groups were experimental groups and two control groups. There were six students in each group - two good comprehenders and four poor comprehenders. Good comprehenders were included to facilitate discussion and instill cognitive courage among the poor comprehenders (Lundberg, 2005).

The students attended grade 5 and were selected on (a) the basis of tests of decoding and reading comprehension together with (b) teacher rating of the students’ attitude to reading, their ability to reflect and infer and propensity to superficial reading (c.f. Lundberg, 2005). The tests confirmed that the poor comprehenders had difficulties in understanding although their decoding was considered adequate.

Procedure

The data were collected mainly in the spring of 2007. In all there are 12 videotaped lessons. For the first videotaped lesson, the regular lesson, the teachers chose the newspaper texts. The texts varied in range from 111 words to over 2.000 words and were taken from different newspapers. For the second and third text talks the authors chose the texts. The both texts were about 200 words each. Each text was introduced to the four teachers one week prior to videotaping.

As mentioned above the texts were taken from different kinds of newspapers. Normally, the difference in difficulty level is, generally speaking, not great among different newspapers (see Reichenberg & Wadbring, 2004). The choice of newspaper, however, plays another important part. Different papers have different status and credibility (Weibull, 2005), and by choosing different papers, the option of a discussion about quality was made available. The procedure was as follow:

1. INTRODUCTION. *Presentations to teachers, students and the students’ guardians.*
2. THE FIRST VIDEOTAPING. *For the first videotaping the teachers—in the experimental groups as well as in the control groups—were instructed to talk about the text with their students in 20 minutes. This will henceforth be referred to as the first text talk.*
3. SEMINARS. *After the first text talk the teachers in the experimental groups were invited to participate in seminars led by the investigators. In these seminars the regular lessons were analyzed regarding teacher questions, students’ answers, teacher strategies etc. Furthermore current reading research concerning reading comprehension, reading strategies, different question types, etc, was discussed. The role of newspaper in society and what makes a newspaper text easy or difficult to understand were also on the agenda. During these seminars the teachers were also introduced to QtA, and between the seminars they practised the model in the classroom without being videotaped.*
4. MORE VIDEOTAPING. *Then there was a second videotaping and after that more seminars for the teachers in the experimental groups before the third and last videotaping.*

RESULT I: TEACHERS’ QUESTIONING SCHEDULES

The teachers are the ones who lead the text talks. How they introduce and end the text talks is therefore important, as is the type of questions they ask as well as what strategies they use to make the students make meaning from the texts.

Introducing the texts

Depending on how the introduction is done, expectations can be created about the text being funny or thrilling—or just something that “has to” be read. The introduction also says quite a bit about how the teachers relate to the text as a newspaper text specifically. None of the four teachers gave the students any explicit reading instructions regarding how to get a deeper comprehension of the text. The excerpt below presents how one of the teachers in the control group went about this task.

Teacher Roos: Now, it's like this, we're going to read a text which is an article from a newspaper. And we have talked a bit about newspapers, about how much one can learn from them. "Vi i fem-man" (a quiz-show with fifth-graders) really learn a lot from reading newspapers. You become informed about current events, right?

All: Yeah.

Roos: You become generally well-informed, one could say. Now, there are a few words that are difficult to understand, and I thought that, before we start reading the article, I'll write a few words on the board and explain them because then you can more easily comprehend... I think I'll write all the words first... perhaps you can figure out what this article is about when you see the words.

Teacher Roos' instruction is verbose and she in particular spends a lot of time going through vocabulary, so much that there is hardly any time left to deal with the content. Teacher Hegg in the other control group also had a verbose instruction. The two teachers continued with verbose instructions also during the second and the third text talk.

The teachers in the experimental groups changed their way of introducing texts. Teacher Syren (experimental group) will be our example:

Teacher Syren: Before we start, could you please read, William?

William: Killing was like drinking a glass of water.

Syren: What do you think headline is supposed to tell us? Let's start with you, Kalle, what do you think this article will be about?

Teacher Syren discusses the headline with the children for a while and then moves on:

Syren: ...You'll now read the text silently. This is no competition about who is the fastest reader, but I want you to comprehend what you read and then we'll read it together.

Teacher Syren has made her first segmentation after the subtitle, which she asks the poor comprehender William to read aloud. Then she addresses the poor comprehender Kalle and questions him what he thinks the article is to be about, by using this strategy she encourages Kalle to read the subtitle carefully and from what he reads make a conclusion what the text will be about. After having discussed this she recommends the students to read slowly so that they can understand what they read.

Teachers' questions

Questions play a central role in a text talk. An important step in the analysis has been to investigate the teachers' different questions during all the text talks. A question here means an utterance by the teacher that requires some kind of response from the students. From earlier research and experience (Reichenberg, 2008) four main question categories and a few subcategories could be identified:

1. *Factual, where the students just have to retrieve information from the text to be able to answer the teacher's question. Specific factual questions where the teachers encourage students to express themselves in their own words.*
2. *Check knowledge, where the teacher wants to check if the students know, for instance, the meaning of a word or if they have the necessary prior knowledge, e.g. "Were transported—do you know what that means?" (Teacher Hegg).*
3. *Open-ended, where there are several possible answers to the question and the answer is not to be found in the text. Half-open questions are also included here, e.g. "What causes a car crash like this one?" (Teacher Roos).*
4. *Inference questions, where the students have to read between the lines to be able to answer the questions, e.g. "What do you think the author wants to tell us with this headline and lead?" (Teacher Syren). (See Cain & Oakhill, 1999, for a further discussion of inferences).*

As can be seen in Table 1, the first text talk was dominated by check knowledge questions for all the four teachers. The teachers mostly wanted to know whether the students understood the meaning of difficult words. In both control groups, going through difficult vocabulary took up so much time that there was hardly any time left to go through the text properly.

Table 1 Teacher questions in all text talks (frequencies)

| | Syren (exp.) | | | Lilja (exp.) | | | Roos (control) | | | Hegg (control) | | |
|----------------------------|--------------|-----|-----|--------------|-----|-----|----------------|-----|-----|----------------|-----|-----|
| | TT1 | TT2 | TT3 | TT1 | TT2 | TT3 | TT1 | TT2 | TT3 | TT1 | TT2 | TT3 |
| Factual questions | 1 | 3 | - | 1 | 5 | 7 | 1 | - | 1 | 3 | 5 | 5 |
| Specific factual questions | - | 1 | 2 | - | 4 | - | - | - | - | 2 | 3 | - |
| Check knowledge questions | 8 | 9 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 10 | 7 | 6 | 12 | 9 | 3 |
| Open-ended questions | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | 1 | - | 1 | 2 | - | - |
| Half-open questions | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | - | 1 | 1 | 3 | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| Inference questions | 2 | 11 | 13 | - | 9 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | - |

Comment: TT means "Text Talk"

The teachers in the experimental groups also went through difficult word but not for as long. Teacher Lilja asked the smallest number of text related questions. In contrast, she asked many other questions, which is important in its own right—but this could have been discussed without reading the newspaper article. The students were thus given the opportunity to talk, but it is hard to tell if they had comprehended the content of the text, since teacher Lilja asked so few text related questions.

There is a change of the communication patterns in the experimental groups during the second and third text talks, i.e. the QtA talks (Table 1). The number of check knowledge questions decreased and there was a dramatically increase of inference questions in the experimental groups. This was not the case in the control groups. More than half of the questions in the control groups are factual and check knowledge questions. Only teacher Roos asks an inference question in each text talk.

Ending the text talks

If introducing the texts is important for creating interest, ending them is at least as important. It is often the ending that lingers in one’s mind after a talk. Even though the teachers have talked with the students about the newspaper text during the reading, it is still important at the end to tie together what has been read. So, how do the teachers end the first text talk?

None of the four teachers asked the students to summarize the newspaper text in the first text talk. Consequently it should be difficult for them to have any idea about whether the students have comprehended the texts they read. Teacher Roos, for example, poses a final guiding question asking the students if they have learned anything. She then tells them herself what they have learned, which is many difficult words that occur in newspapers. Whether the students agree is anybody’s guess, as she does not ask them—so that lesson, too, ends in nothingness. The same is true for teacher Hegg who illustrates how a talk ending in nothingness can look:

Teacher Hegg: Yes, and it is a bit cool to tell about such stories too, I think we have kept going for those fifteen minutes that they wanted, so we'll end now.

The experimental group teachers’ ways of introducing texts as well as asking questions undergo a certain change during the second and third text talk. Does the way of ending the text talks change as well? Yes, the endings do change.

For example, teacher Lilja in the experimental group not only asks the students to summarize the text she also asks them for an alternative headline when they have finished reading. Good as well as poor comprehenders alike, offer different suggestions which show that they have been able to make mea-

ning from the text.

Both teacher Roos and teacher Hegg in the control groups end their second and third text talks in the same way as their first, in nothingness.

RESULT II: YOUNG READERS QUESTIONING THE AUTHORITY OF NEWSPAPER TEXTS

When the teachers use the QtA model and thus encourage the students to question the author, the desired outcome is that the students initiate questions, infer and reflect on the content of the text.

Different kinds of answers

From earlier research and experience (Reichenberg, 2008) four types of answer categories could be identified²:

1. Retrieved information directly from the text, word by word.
2. Retrieved information from the text but in their own words.
3. Inferences, i.e. read between and beyond the lines.
4. Reflections, includes commentaries about the text and student initiated questions.

An overview of the students’ answers is presented in table 2.

Table 2 Student answers in all text talks (frequencies)

| | Syren (exp.) | | | Lilja (exp.) | | | Roos (control) | | | Hegg (control) | | |
|------------------------|--------------|-----|-----|--------------|-----|-----|----------------|-----|-----|----------------|-----|-----|
| | TT1 | TT2 | TT3 | TT1 | TT2 | TT3 | TT1 | TT2 | TT3 | TT1 | TT2 | TT3 |
| Directly from the text | 1 | 1 | - | - | 5 | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| Own words | 1 | 3 | 3 | - | 3 | 4 | 1 | - | - | 2 | 2 | - |
| Reflections | - | 5 | 17 | - | 2 | 7 | 1 | - | 5 | 1 | - | 4 |
| Inferences | 1 | 7 | 12 | - | 4 | 6 | - | 1 | 1 | - | - | 1 |

Comment: TT means "Text Talk".

In the first text talk there were few inferences and reflections. As shown in Table 2, the students in the experimental groups infer and reflect to a far greater extent during the QtA talks.

The control groups look a bit different. Above all, not as many answers are

given as in the two experimental groups. Inferences are conspicuous by their absence.

The students start questioning the author

In the experimental groups, discussions get very animated in the two QtA talks. It is obvious that the students have just discovered that the writer of a text can be questioned. They voiced several opinions, among them on the headline Killing was like drinking a glass of water. In excerpt below from the second text talk the good comprehender Nea and the poor comprehender Rasmus are very engaged:

Teacher Syren: ...why do you think they used this headline?

Rasmus: You read and you think... and look more at it then.

Syren: You look at it more then? This one? Why?

Rasmus: Because drinking a glass of water is more...

Syren: I see what you mean.

Nea: We already know that there are many child soldiers but this is more catchy.

Syren: So it catches the attention more? So you think it is a trick the author uses to make you read more?

During the third text talk about the young marathon runner, the students in the experimental groups show even greater fervour in their discussions—and the teacher stays in the background in another way than before. The students in the control groups do not comment upon the texts. The only comments are provided by the teachers. Not once during the second and third text talks did the teachers in the control groups ask about the author's message. They did not even bring the author to the students' attention.

The excerpt below, from the second text talk in one of the control groups about Killing was like drinking a glass of water, will provide an example of this:

Teacher Roos: ...Why is it so important to go through them first? /the words—our comment./

Anders: Because if you say a word and we don't know what it is then we don't learn anything from it.

Roos: Then you don't learn anything from it. Then it gets difficult to understand the text as a whole, doesn't it? What it is about, if you all the time get stuck on difficult words. If it is like that, then each one of you will make your own interpretation every time you find a difficult word. Then it's not sure that you get it right. The result can be that you go around saying that we read an article about this, and this is your own interpretation. Then you spread false... incorrect information.

Teacher Roos is completely focussed on words in the text, not the content. With some risk of overextending the interpretation, it appears that this is how teacher Roos usually goes through a text with her class, as the poor comprehender Anders' answer to the question why it is important to go through the words gives us a hint that he knows the "correct" answer: they don't learn anything.

RESULT III: DISCUSSING NEWSPAPER TEXTS PER SE

When learning the QtA model the teachers were not taught media skills. But the media—above all newspaper texts—are used regularly in the teaching of our four classes, just as is the case in many other schools and classes, and for this reason it is important to study how they are used.

Newspaper texts and the media are introduced

When the texts are introduced, three of the teachers mention that the text they will discuss is from a newspaper. Teacher Roos in one of the control groups is the one who says the most about the kind of media the text is taken from. They have talked about newspapers and she reminds the students that they can learn a lot from reading newspapers (see quotation above).

A very interesting way of discussing newspapers and media is found in one of the experimental groups. A certain critical attitude can be sensed, which is factually reasonable and correct. Teacher Syren talks about the Halloween article with her students:

Teacher Syren: Well... What is the media? I have read about that in the media... Where have I then read it? Or seen it?

Lotta: Like, in a newspaper.

Syren: Yes, exactly.

Nea: In newspapers and on TV.

Syren: Yes, you know, advertising on TV has a huge effect. It makes people want to buy things they see all the time. And when the media brings something up, business latched on right away. Why do you think it did? Why did business latch on and said "Oh, we'll start selling that".

Nea: Because they wanted to sell it.

Syren: Yes, to make money. They saw that this is something we can make money on. So then business latched on. And so they added Halloween products and then it sounded exciting, then you wanted to get it. The media brought it up and it was available in the stores...

That the media and business are linked to each other is a very relevant discussion when it comes to the media. It is furthermore a connection made from the text, where the influence of the media world on people is expressed.

In all, only teacher Syren does something special of the fact that it is a newspaper article the students are working with. For the other teachers, it could have been any text whatsoever.

The outer format of the article is brought up

During the second and third text talks the teachers also address the format of the texts more. It is the outer format that is being focussed by all four teachers in the sense that they go through what a headline and a lead are, and the pictures too get some attention from a couple of the teachers. An example from one of the control groups illustrates this:

Teacher Roos: Today we'll read another text and it looks like this. Can you see where it is taken from?

Ellinor: An internet page of Expressen.

Roos: And can you see what kind of a text it is?

Ellinor: An article.

Roos: Yes, it's an article from a newspaper, that's right, no doubt about it...
Ellinor, how can you see that it is a newspaper text?

Ellinor: There is a big text at the top.

Arvid: Then there is a bit of that kind of text.

Roos: Yes, it begins with a headline and then that kind of small text, the lead...

Even though all the teachers talk about how the text is constructed, they do it to varying degrees and in different ways. Teacher Roos stays at a technical level, while teacher Syren, for example, is more interested in whether the text fits with the headline and lead.

Traces of media criticism

A small amount of media criticism can be perceived. It addresses, among other things, where the articles are from. For example, one article is from the Internet edition of Expressen (an evening paper) and is a so-called rewrite. That means the story is taken from another medium and rewritten by the newspaper's own journalists:

Nea: Have they pinched it from another newspaper?

Teacher Syren: How are you thinking?

Lotta: Perhaps Sky News works for this paper?

Nea: But it says that she works at Expressen.

Lotta: Perhaps they have taken it from another newspaper?

Syren: Yes, they have probably taken it from another paper.

As can be seen from the excerpt above both the good comprehender Nea and the poor comprehender Lotta initiate media critical lessons. Practicing structured text talks can and should not in any way be linked to what has been said about the media. Rather, it is individual persons—teachers or a student—who put the spotlight on what is significant of the medium. Only the teacher, however, can turn that into something, bringing it up beyond the specific article.

CONCLUSIONS

Although this is a limited study, we can see certain tendencies across the results. Both teachers and students in the experimental groups change their way of approaching texts during the QtA talks. The results of this study are supported by earlier results that have focussed expository texts (e.g. Beck et. al., 1996; Sandora, Beck & McKeown, 1999; Reichenberg, 2008).

The purpose of this study is therefore easy to address: it is possible to use the QtA model to improve students' reading comprehension, with a special emphasis on newspaper texts. This answer is valid despite newspaper texts being primarily written for adults, not children. Journalistic news texts normally have a very wide audience and a large readership, and not all adults are good comprehenders either.

This study indicates that there can be a certain value in talking with teachers about reading strategies. During the QtA talks, the teachers really made an effort to let the thinking take place in the students' heads by bouncing

questions from the students back to the group. Furthermore, the teachers encouraged the students to ask if they did not understand and to question the author's way of expressing him- or herself. The students reacted positively to this and questioning became a theme throughout the QtA talks.

The study also indicates that the poor comprehenders in the experimental groups had the potentials to infer and reflect.

The way in which the teachers used newspaper texts in this study is as teaching material, where the medium is seen as a tool for learning. There were also traces of what can be called critical media competency, as when the conditions of the media were discussed in terms of how journalistic texts are created. Finding more critical media competency was not to be expected, since the primary objective for the teachers was to learn using the QtA model, not being critical of the media.

It is reasonable to assume that once the teachers and students are familiar with the QtA model and practice it continually, it would be possible to introduce critical media competency as a new step within the framework of the same model. The teachers are likely to need more knowledge about the media for this to be possible, but with additional media skills at their disposal, teachers have a functional model to use in their classrooms where the media become a natural part.

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¹ One of the investigators categorized the teachers' questions. To determine reliability an interrater reliability test was performed. Independently of each other, the raters categorized the questions, and there was a 95 per cent agreement between the investigator and the raters. The discrepancies were solved in discussions with a third rater.

² To determine reliability the same interrater reliability test was performed as described above. There was a 96 per cent agreement between the investigator and the raters.

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