Using Reading Response Journals for Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This action research study is aimed at addressing the memory issues that are seen daily in the classroom. Students in a literature-based reading program used reading response journals to assist in their reading comprehension. Anecdotal observations, journal writing, conferencing, interest surveys, and knowledge-based comprehension tests were used to determine the effectiveness of this approach.

Memory has three components: sensory memory storage, short-term memory storage, and long-term memory storage. It is desirable for students to get major concepts into long-term memory and back out when needed. This process includes the steps of encoding, storage, retrieval, and reporting. Many factors can influence these steps. Teaching memory strategies could help improve a student's memory ability. In this study, keeping a reading response journal was the strategy used to reach this goal and
subsequently to improve reading comprehension.

Research into Literature

A student reads a book. She says it is very good and is not having any problems as she reads it. When she takes a knowledge-based test on it she scores four correct out of ten.

Yet another student, after reading two chapters, cannot tell the name of the main character of the story. When reading orally with this same student, I did not find him to have any problem with pronunciation and in most cases he can tell what the words mean, but he cannot relate what just happened in the story.

These issues seem to point to a problem with this student's memory ability to remember what was read. This can be and often is very frustrating to a teacher. So what can be done? Some teachers do such things as verbal rehearsal or use manipulatives. But when that is not enough, what then? Would having the student write about what they read help him or her comprehend it? These are the questions I have had. The experiences mentioned have happened in my own classroom. I have become very frustrated with students who just do not seem to get it, especially in the area of reading comprehension.

My research into the literature was two-pronged. I felt it necessary to investigate the role of memory and what memory is as well as investigate reading response journals.

What is memory? According to the Random House College Dictionary, (1982), it is "the mental capacity of retaining and reviving impressions, or of recalling or recognizing previous experiences." In other words, it is remembering. Memory has three main steps to memory storage: sensory memory storage, short-term memory storage, and long-term memory storage (Turkington & Harris, 2001). Turkington and Harris go on to say that short-term memory storage is the temporary storage of information while it is being processed and that important information must then be pushed on to long term memory storage. The short-term memory has also been referred to as the working memory. It is here as a "mental work space" (p.256) that we sort and encode information before adding it to long-term memory, or we pull information from long-term memory to reprocess it, (Zimbardo, Weber, & Johnson, (2003). Levine (2002) says that long-term memory is "the warehouse for more or less permanent knowledge," (p.93). It is in the long-term memory that storage involving associations with words or meaning occurs (Turkington & Harris, 2001).

To take this idea a step further, the memory process can be looked at as having three parts, encoding, storage, and retrieval (Battle & Labercane, 1985). Gillam (1997) adds one more part, reporting. The encoding would be to attend to and interpret the information. The storage would be the holding on of information. The retrieval would be the process of recalling information or bringing it back to mind, and reporting it would be the giving out of the information either verbally or in written form (Gillam, 1997).

Each person differs in his/her long-term memory abilities. Influences such as maturation, age, and genetic differences in the speed of processing information, play a role in how an individual develops memory (Weinert & Helmke, 1998). So a young child will have a lesser memory ability than an older child. Also, certain influences can specifically affect each step of the memory process. Prior knowledge experience, degree of participation, and discussion of an event during the event happening can affect the encoding of information (Hudson & Gillam, 1997). Encoding is also influenced by the degree of attention being given to a task by a person (Levine, 2002; Gillam, 1997; Davis, & Cochran, 1989). The research also suggests that if a student is not paying attention then he or she will not retain what is being learned. Time, changes in knowledge base, repetition of similar experiences, experience reenactment, and re-experiencing part of an event can influence the storage of information (Hudson & Gillam, 1997). Influence on retrieval can be affected by the use of props, drawing, and age difference (Hudson & Gillam, 1997). Narrative skills and frequency of opportunities to participate in memory type conversation influence the reporting step (Hudson & Gillam, 1997).

By knowing about such influences, can a teacher then implement strategies to enhance a student's memory? Yes, it seems that some do agree that it is possible to teach strategies to enhance a student's memory. It is argued that the teaching of memory strategies is important and enhances the use of higher order skills (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1992). Scruggs and Mastropieri (1992) also note that a strong knowledge base is an important beginning to higher order skills and the using memory strategies can help develop this strong knowledge base. Students who have been exposed to high memory strategy usage have better comprehension especially for low and average achievers (Moley et al., 1992). Memory strategies are needed for success in school so it is important to train children in their use (Arabsolghar & Elkins, 2000). But, it should not

stop there. Students need to also know when to use a strategy and know the value of using it (Cox, 1994).

Memory strategies are activities that are used to improve a memory outcome (Arabsolghar & Elkins, 2000). So what and how does a teacher need to teach? Scruggs and Mastropieri (1992) suggest ways teachers can improve their students' abilities to remember. Two of these ways are on what I chose to focus. The first, according to Scruggs and Mastropieri (1992), is to promote memory by writing things down such as taking notes and journal writing. The other given by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1992) is to increase practice and review by focusing on the important concepts and provide a brief but regular review. Chunking and rehearsal strategies help to retain material and then to transfer it to long-term memory (Zimbardo, Weber, & Johnson, 2003). These suggestions seem to point to the use of reading response journals.

Perkins (1992), in his book *Smart Schools, From Training Memories to Educating Minds* gives three goals for education: retention of knowledge, understanding of knowledge, and active use of knowledge. He notes that these three goals can occur only by learning events in which students must "think about and think with what they are learning" (p.8). These thoughts scaffold the use of reading response journals to the role of memory on learning. The retention of knowledge encompasses memory and the understanding and active use of knowledge. This retention could come from keeping a reading response journal. For students to have the opportunity to express a response to their reading helps develop memory, therefore, several professional resources have stressed the use of reader response journals (Asselin 2000).

A reading response journal, according to Fountas & Pinnell (2001), is a place that students can write about their reading. The journal allows students to record their thoughts so that they can review and reflect on them. Another definition describes them as a journal where students respond to any reading by writing summaries of what they read or personal reactions to what they read (Manning, 1999). Manning (1999) went on to explain that the purpose for such a journal offers the teacher a way to see the amount of meaning of a text that the reader has constructed. It has also been stated that the purpose for a reader's journal is to write about, and respond to reading and to hold on to the information (Rief, 2003).

Study Plan

I used the students in my fifth grade classroom as my research population. The students ranged in age from ten years to twelve years. I had students with reading abilities ranging from second grade to sixth grade. There were ten girls and ten boys represented in this study. The ethnic background was approximately 66% white and 33% Native American. The students came from low to middle income families. The families were two-parent, single-parent, or guardianship by another family member.

This study took place for a three nine-week period. The first nine-week period was spent getting the preliminary data and surveying completed, as well as laying the ground work for other data collection. The second nine-week period was when the bulk of my anecdotal observations, reading conference observations, and monitoring of their journals took place. The third nine-week period was used for collecting the ending data and analysis of that data.

I started my project by informing my principal of my research study. I then sought parental permission of my students by way of a letter and permission form sent to the home with the student. I sent reminders for the return of the permission form. If after three weeks, a student did not return the permission form, I considered the student as not having permission and excluded them from the study. Only one student did not return the form.

The next step was to establish the requirements involved with beginning the students in the Accelerated Reading program, keeping student reading logs, and reading conference procedures. I also laid the groundwork and expectations of using a reading response journal. The expectations included writing daily about what they read, and answering questions or comments I may have made to their responses. I chose to keep the writing limited to them summarizing what they read and to elicit their feelings about what they read through my questions and comments. I also expected them to reread what they had written on a particular book prior to reading further the next day or testing on the book. This reinforced the suggestions of Scruggs and Mastropieri (1992) of promoting external memory by writing things down and increasing practice and review by providing brief but regular review.

I triangulated my data collection. To begin with I had students fill out a survey on their reading habits and attitudes. This was done before and after the study. I used a Likert scale of zero to four and tally marks to help visualize changes if any in their responses**.** My assumption was that the more confident students felt about their reading the more attentive they may be to their reading and attention to task increases retention of material (Levine, 2002).

As referenced before, I kept anecdotal observations of the students as they read and responded in their journals. I watched for time on task in comparison the amount and quality of writing they produced. I then watched for an increase or decrease in frequency.

On average, I conducted reading conferences on an individual basis four times during the nine-week period,with students over the books they had read. This helped me to monitor their thinking and to personally discuss their feelings about using a reading response journal. Through the book summaries and character descriptions done during these conferences, I was able to also detect improvement in a student's ability to recall information.

I used the Accelerated Reading program as part of my literature-based reading instruction. Within this program students read books of their choice at their level and then are tested on the computer. The program gave reports on their testing averages at any given time. The questions on these tests tend to be low level comprehension type questions and are therefore highly dependent on a student's ability to recall information from the stories they had read. The higher the average score was for testing, the better their recall of information.

It would not be fair to assume that there was no anxiety or risk with this project. Some students experienced frustration in having to keep a journal. Some also had feelings of inadequacy from low test scores. One-on-one assistance was given to those students who needed it. It was the sincere hope of this researcher that using reading response journals would improve my students' reading comprehension. I felt that keeping such a journal could assist my students in any of their academic endeavors as well as their reading outside of school.

Results

I first have to admit that, on paper, my proposal seemed so workable but putting it into practice was another story. The frustrations that some students had with keeping a journal and with reading on a daily basis in general erupted some days into out and out refusal to comply. This happened regardless of how much compromising was done. I often found myself tending to these difficulties instead of collecting anecdotal data or making conference observations.

After the first couple weeks, I analyzed my notes and noticed I had dwelled more on the repeated lack of motivation on the part of several students. I then chose to break my students into two groups for closer study. I felt that those students who were on task would be give me one picture of my research and those who were not on task another view. Students who were on task but had tested poorly had not reviewed their responses in their journals. When they went back and reviewed, they tested again with much better results. I observed other students developing the habit of looking over their responses before continuing to read. When I asked them about this, they responded that it helped them to refocus on the story. One student even said that it was handy because she had lost her bookmark and by rereading her last response she could tell where she was in the book. During their reading conferences, a repeated comment from many of the students was that keeping the reading response journal was helpful for remembering what they had read. I also noticed that the summaries the students wrote about their books and brought to the reading conference were better written with more detail in a more sequential manner.

Analysis of the journals themselves revealed growth for most of the students. I took a sample from the beginning of the nine-week period and another from the end of the nine-week period. The length of the entries grew from one line to several lines and even paragraphs. The following is an example of an early entry; "So far in my book Merlin has finally got back to the dark hills." A later entry from the same student read; "Mrs. Buus, Jeff is at home and was reading a letter from Lucy and Lucy is getting good at milking the cow. And she likes Jeff's dog." To some this difference may not seem like much, but for this student it was significant. Another student's beginning entry was; "I read Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing and I liked it." The ending entry read; "Matilda's dad was mean to her but in the morning Matilda's dad told her that she was as brilliant as Shakespear while he was styling his hair and Matilda said Shakespear was bald and her dad was about to cut his hair." Again, this student showed growth by adding more detail and showing a better understanding of what was read. One student started out writing three pages telling almost every little thing that happened. By the end of the research period this student was down to one page or less telling the important details worth remembering. Those students who were not as motivated tended not to show much difference at all in their entries.

With the reading surveys, I was hoping to get an idea of my student's attitudes about reading and writing about their reading. In general there was not much change between the pre and post surveys. In October, out of twenty students surveyed, all but four students rated being able to read was very important. In January this changed to all but one student, and that student rated it as just important. When asked how well they liked to read, scores went from twelve students saying "well" or "very well" in October, to fifteen students saying "well" to "very well" in January. The question of how much they thought writing about what they read would influence how well they remembered what they read resulted in a slight decrease between October and

January. On a scale of zero to four, with zero being "not at all" and four being "very much", sixteen students marked three or four in October. In January, that number went down to fourteen. When students were asked to write out responses on how they remembered what they have read, the answers were quite varied on the pre-survey in October, but nine of them did say "writing about it." On the post-survey in January this response had only increased to ten.

The testing scores from the Accelerated Reading program had twelve students with lower test scores at the end of the research period than at the beginning. Of those twelve, five decreased less that five percent, but these students had increased their reading levels so a slight decrease would be expected due to the fact that they were new to experiencing the more difficult text. The other students experienced a decrease of ten percent or more. I also called it a decrease if a student failed to read and test on a book during the nine-week period, two students fell into this category. On the flip side of this, eight students showed an increase in their testing averages. Four of the eight students had increased their reading levels, while two students had lower reading levels and two students remained the same on their reading levels. I would note here that the eight students who showed an increase in their testing averages were also students who were consistently on task with reading and writing in their reading response journals.

My final part of data collecting was the completion by the students of a making meaning about reading response journals worksheet. This worksheet was designed to get a feeling for how the students were perceiving the use of the journals. It was completed about midway through the research period. I read the questions orally to the students as they read along and filled in their responses. This worksheet started out with the students giving one-word descriptors of what reading response journals are to them. Answers ranged from "cool," "fun,",and "educational," to "boring," "stupid," and "dumb." There were far more positive responses given than negative responses. The final question had students write a two-word statement to give their opinion about the journals. Seventeen students wrote a positive statement and only three wrote a negative statement. Again, I noted that the negative statements came from students who were not motivated to keeping the reading response journals.

Conclusion

In analyzing the data and notes, I discovered an underlying factor that seemed to be an important issue in the results. That factor was motivation on the part of the student. I describe motivation here as the desire to read and respond consistently in their reading response journals.

If I were to ignore the results of students who were consistently not motivated, I would find the use of reading response journals a worthy strategy to enhance memory and thus increase reading comprehension. Almost all of my motivated students exhibited some positive results. For some, the increases were slight. I do feel that by the end of the year these increases would be greater.

The disturbing result was those students who were consistently not wanting to participate. They should not be ignored. These students found keeping the journals too much work, or boring, or just not worth their time. They are also the students in my room that tend to balk at any writing assignment and are slow to finish their work. They found the responding just one more thing to do.

With this in mind, I feel that the use of reading response journals is not for every student. Adjustments need to be made for those who find it not for them. Some suggestions I gathered from colleagues were to not have them write daily, allow them to draw about what they read, or vary the writing by giving them specific things to write about. One colleague also suggested a form that they just fill in to cut down on the amount of writing the student had to do. This would also give the student direction on what to write. I shall continue to explore this strategy by trying some of these suggestions.

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