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Using a Modified Reciprocal Teaching Approach with First-Graders to Impact Comprehension

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Abstract

A key component to teaching successful readers is to create a strong foundation of comprehension skills. One research-based method of comprehension instruction is Reciprocal Teaching (RT). RT has been proven effective at boosting comprehension with students in upper grades; however, there is less data available to support this claim at the elementary level. This study explored the impact of a modified RT approach in a first grade classroom, through whole group read-alouds and scaffolded small group interactions, on student comprehension. Students received explicit instruction of the reading strategies: predicting, clarifying, questioning and summarizing, and then opportunities to take ownership for their learning and practice the strategies independently in small groups. Findings indicate that students' comprehension was impacted and student discourse regarding comprehension strategies became more complex.

Keywords: Reciprocal teaching, comprehension, first-grade, small-groups, read-alouds

Introduction

In many states, including Minnesota, legislation has gone into effect requiring that all students read well, at or above grade level, by 3rd grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). Yet, according to the 2011 Nation's Report Card, only 35% of fourth graders in the United States were scoring proficient or above in the area of reading (NECS, 2011). To fully understand these test scores, it is important to note that when the National Center for Education Statistics was collecting these data, they were using an assessment tool designed to measure comprehension. To demonstrate proficiency, students were asked to decode a passage and apply comprehension strategies to understand and evaluate the information they were reading. The number of students not scoring in the proficient range in the area of reading confirmed my belief that even some strong decoders are struggling to make meaning from text.

The discrepancy between decoding and comprehension is evident in my experience with first grade students. I have received extensive training and participated in a number of workshops to learn about decoding instruction. Contrary to the decoding training I have received, much less assistance and clarity has been provided when it comes to comprehension instruction. Goldenberg stated that, "true education---real teaching---involves helping students think, reason, comprehend, and understand important ideas," yet this is the area where I was not meeting the needs of every student in my classroom (1992, p.316). I was confident in my ability to teach my students how to be successful decoders, yet struggled to instill the real purpose of reading--to make meaning from the text. In response, I set out to find a research-based approach to comprehension instruction that would help all my students achieve a higher level of text comprehension.

Much of current research calls into question the role of the teacher and the student during comprehension instruction. A shift has been made away from traditional approaches (lectures, recitation, direct instruction) which are based upon the assumption that the teacher's role is to help students learn what the teacher already knows and can do, to a constructivist approach of learning (Goldenberg, 1992). In a constructivist approach, learning is a social experience, where students actively use language and discussions to construct understanding and create meaning from different experiences (Vygotsky, 1978).

Keeping in mind the recommendations made by the U.S. Department of Education publication, *Successfully Delivering Scientifically Based Comprehension Instruction to K-3 Students* (2010), I began to explore new methods of comprehension instruction. I sought an approach that would utilize social learning and incorporate the recommendations made by the U.S. Department of Education. The five recommendations are as follows: 1) Teach students how to use reading comprehension strategies; 2) Teach students to identify and use the text's organizational structure to comprehend, learn, and remember content; 3) Guide students through focused, high-quality discussions on the meaning of the text; 4) Select texts purposefully to support comprehension development; 5.) Establish engaging and motivating context in which to teach reading comprehensions (Shanahan et. al., 2010).

One method of comprehension instruction that fulfilled these requirements was Palincsar and Brown's (1984) Reciprocal Teaching. This method of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring instruction has consistently been shown to increase reading comprehension, provide a framework for social learning, and address each of the five recommendations made by the U.S. Department of Education (Hacker & Tenent, 2002; Pressley, 2002). When using a modified RT approach in a pilot study it was evident that it could be an

effective method of whole-group comprehension instruction for first-graders. This prompted me to begin considering it as a tool to impact comprehension in my small-groups as well. The goal of this study was to further explore the RT approach and determine what modifications are needed to successfully utilize this approach in a first-grade classroom. This study further explores the impact this method of instruction has on comprehension in a large-group and a small-group setting.

Literature Review

What is Reciprocal Teaching?

Reciprocal Teaching is a student-centered approach that delivers explicit instruction regarding four comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring strategies. After analyzing many comprehension methods, four strategies were chosen as important by Palincsar and Brown: predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing (1984). These strategies have been shown to be effective at promoting reading comprehension and metacognitive skills such as self-monitoring, assessing progress, and taking remedial action when needed (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Meyers, 2005). Through continued scaffolded practice, students become confident in their abilities to use the strategies and begin to orchestrate them simultaneously, as opposed to using them strictly in isolation. For example, when comprehension breaks down for a reader, they are able to choose from several strategies to solve the problem. If one strategy is not effective, they are able to seamlessly try another (Medina & Pilonieta, 2009).

The four strategies are introduced together from the very beginning, and through collaboration and successful discourse, students are provided a more authentic reading experience resulting in deepened comprehension (Reutzel, Smith & Fawson, 2005; Shanahan et al., 2010). The dialogue is structured to incorporate the four strategies and implemented in a

systematic and purposeful manner. This familiar format is successful because students know what to expect from the conversation and it also provides a useful vehicle for alternating control of the activity between teacher and students (Palincsar, Ransom, & Derber, 1989).

Implicit in Palincsar's and Brown's empirically based model of teaching effectiveness was the concept of scaffolding (what others have called coaching)--supportive actions by the teacher to move either an individual or a group of students to the next level of independence in completing a task, strategy, or activity (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, Rodriguez, 2003). Initially, the teacher assumes an active role, explaining the use of the strategies and modeling their appropriate use relative to the demands of the text. Gradually the students take on a leadership role and the teacher's active role is reduced to coaching (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002). The end result is that students become leaders in their small group which provides opportunities for peers to learn from each other (Sporer et. al., 2009).

This practice of social learning through peer groups has received considerable attention in contemporary discussions of schooling. Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez (2003) note that the more students are performing literacy activities themselves, the greater their active engagement in learning becomes and hence the greater their opportunity for growth. The shared social context of this practice encourages group members to contribute their thinking as they work together, with the expectation being that every participant in the group is responsible for leading the dialogue as their peers provide assistance as needed. Rather than receive knowledge simply from their teacher, students are able to provide assistance to one another. For example, in the process of helping a peer address a confusion in the text, students construct metaphors drawing upon action heroes, computer games, song lyrics and other contemporary popular media about which adults may know very little (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002).

Another key component of RT is the utilization of small groups. Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (1999) found that time spent in small-group instruction for reading distinguished effective schools from the other schools. Teaching within the confines of small-groups allows the teacher to deliver specific instruction and coaching within a student's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), allowing the students to participate at whatever level they are capable (Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher must be acutely aware of the student's changing cognitive status. This will determine the amount of active teaching and participation that the teacher will deliver (Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

What modifications need to be made to Reciprocal Teaching to make it appropriate for First-grade elementary students?

Although implementing RT in the classroom has proved beneficial to students' comprehension, it has been determined that it can pose obstacles not encountered in the upper grades. The challenges primary educators are often presented with have to do with engagement, the amount of scaffolding needed, and the age appropriateness of leadership in small groups (Hacker & Tenent, 2002). Many teachers have chosen to modify their delivery of Reciprocal Teaching to address these challenges.

One such modification often made is in the area of engagement. Students must actively engage with text to extract and construct its meaning (Snow, 2002). In a study of effective primary-grade reading teachers, Pressley et al. (2002) identified classrooms where students experienced a high level of success. It was determined that a common characteristic of the teachers of these classrooms, was that they were skilled at providing motivating instruction that was as concerned with student involvement as it was about achievement (Chin, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001). In order to engage young students in RT, it is crucial to make an impact when

first introducing students to the strategies. Stricklin (2011) suggests doing this with elements of fun and adventure, as well as costumes and props. Several researchers found that students remembered and internalized the strategies better when they were introduced as characters. Presenting the four strategies of predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing in the form of a metaphor provides children a concrete way of understanding the comprehension strategies. Oczkus (2010) chose to introduce her students to the following characters: The Powerful Predictor who uses a snow globe as a magic ball; Quincy the Questioner who uses a microphone; Clara the Clarifier who uses a special pair of glasses; and Sammy the Summarizer who uses a camera).

Hands-on tools and print supports also aid teachers in making RT lessons fun and exciting. One popular tool is the Four Door Chart. This is a paper-folding activity where students create four doors in which they can record their discussions of the four strategies. The Four Door Chart can also be used as an informal assessment tool to track students' comprehension of texts and understanding of strategies (Oczkus, 2010). Placemats, strategy dice, bookmarks and paper plate dials also serve a similar function. Students can construct a paper plate dial (Figure 1), by dividing a paper plate into four sections and writing the names of the four strategies in each quarter. Attached in the center with a brass fastener is an arrow. Students are then able to manipulate the dial to mentally and visually see the process of switching from one strategy to the next (Stricklin, 2011).



Figure 1
Paper Plate Dial

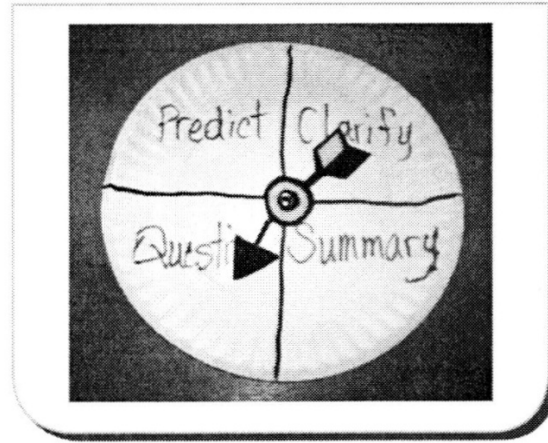


Figure 1. Four door chart and paper plate dial.

The amount of scaffolding younger students require when learning to use the reading strategies is one of the greatest challenges elementary teachers face when modifying RT. “Overall, the amount of scaffolding and the duration of scaffolding were associated with the age and reading ability of the student, with the amount and duration inversely related with age and reading ability” (Hacker & Tenent, 2002, p. 14). Those who participated in research where Reciprocal Teaching was implemented with young elementary students found it beneficial to maintain highly scaffolded instruction for several months before reducing the scaffolding to allow for more independence. Some teachers even found it necessary to maintain this direct guidance throughout the whole year (Hacker & Tenent, 2002).

The increased scaffolding required for students to internalize strategies is directly related to the extent at which young students can practice RT successfully in small groups. Used in isolation, RT in a small group setting may be inappropriate for young students. For many, taking on the responsibility of a group-learning situation too soon may result in cognitive overload (Rosenshire & Meister, 1994). In response to this struggle there have been two primary

responses. One option presented is the pairing of small group instruction with continued whole-group practice using read-alouds. As students become more familiar with the group discourse and comfortable with the four strategies, the teacher's role may switch to that of a facilitator or coach. In time, and with continued practice, students take greater control of their learning and begin leading the conversations in small-groups independently. The use of reading partnerships was also suggested as an effective alternative to an immediate transition into Reciprocal Teaching being practiced in a group (Hacker & Tenent, 2002).

In summary, comprehension is an essential piece of reading instruction that must be fostered at a young age. One method of instruction that has been proven effective at delivering comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring strategies is RT. This involves the direct instruction of four comprehension strategies: predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing. Through guided discussions in both whole-group and small-group settings, students internalize the reading strategies and begin to use them independently. Initially the teacher plays an active role in discussions, but gradually the students take on this role and teacher becomes more of a coach.

When using this approach with primary students it is necessary for modifications to be made. Modifications are made primarily in the areas of engagement, amount of scaffolded instruction, and participation in large and small groups. It is important to consider the needs of the students you are working with and the time frame you have available when making these modifications. These will both impact the way RT is delivered. This action research study further explores the impact of utilizing a modified Reciprocal Teaching approach with first-graders in both large and small group settings.

Pilot Study

My review of the literature suggested that utilizing a modified RT approach with first-grade students might impact reading comprehension. This prompted an initial pilot study in which RT was used as a method of delivering comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring instruction to a group of first-grade students through whole-group read-alouds. The study explored two questions: To what extent will utilizing a modified RT approach during whole group read-alouds impact student comprehension?; and, What modifications need to be made to Reciprocal Teaching to make it appropriate for first-grade students?

The pilot study was conducted in my first grade classroom in a kindergarten through second grade, public elementary school in the midwest. The subjects of the pilot study were 23 first grade students with varying ability levels. From these 23 students, a smaller focus group was chosen to collect pre- and post- data on. This focus group consisted of two students who were performing below grade level, two students who were performing at or near grade level, and two students who were performing above grade level.

The overall procedure was similar to the research conducted by Palincsar and Brown (1984) on RT; however, to modify this approach and to make it more appropriate for first grade students, the work of Pilonieta and Medina (2009), as well as Oczkus (2010), was also used as a guide. To fit the needs of the first-grade participants in this study, the four reading strategies--predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing--were introduced explicitly during a whole-group read-aloud. These strategies were modeled independent of one another using a think aloud. To help students develop a concrete understanding of these abstract ideas, I used the anchor charts, characters, and props detailed below.

	Character	Props
Predicting	<i>Penelope the Predictor</i> - A fortune teller who predicts what will happen in the story	Magic ball
Clarifying	<i>Clarence the Clarifier</i> - A detective who tries to figure out tricky words and ideas	Magnifying glass
Questioning	<i>Quincy the Questioner</i> - A game show host who asks other readers questions about the story	Microphone
Summarizing/Retelling	<i>Randy the Reteller</i> - A cowboy who lassos the important information	Cowboy hat and lasso

Figure 2. RT strategies and the corresponding characters and props.

Each day the group met as a whole and students were given the chance to take on the role of predictor, questioner, clarifier, and summarizer. The rest of the group then had the opportunity to answer questions, give opinions, and offer suggestions to help student leaders if needed (Meyers, 2006). To aid students in their understanding of the four strategies, I assumed an active role in student learning. Through interactive modeling, students participated in successful discourse and gained the skills necessary to participate in student led discussions. As students

gained confidence in the strategies and learned to coordinate them independently, my role slowly began to transition to that of a coach.

According to the quantitative data I collected, it was evident that utilizing a modified RT approach was an effective way to deliver comprehension instruction to my first-grade students. Most of the students in the focus group showed measurable gains in their understanding of text, with only one student remaining stagnant in her reading level. However, it is important to note that this data also showed that the growth in independent reading levels when using a traditional approach to teaching comprehension was very similar to the growth achieved when the modified RT approach was being implemented. Both methods resulted in an average growth of two and a half reading levels over the course three months, using an informal reading inventory.

To collect observational data, I used a checklist with student names to record the frequency of student participation, as well as anecdotal notes. At the conclusion of this study, I evaluated the qualitative data on student engagement. I observed that participation in group discourse during read-alouds increased and students appeared to be more comfortable coordinating the strategies. Several students who were previously hesitant to take part in discussions were asking to be Penelope the Predictor, Clarence the Clarifier, Quincy the Questioner, and Sammy the Summarizer. The students were eager to use the props and take on the personification of their character.

Several factors limited the effectiveness of the pilot study, the most significant of these being time. Implementing a true RT approach requires extensive interactive modeling and continued opportunities to practice using the strategies before students are ready to transition into leadership role. Due to deadlines, extended breaks, and unforeseen delays, this study was limited

to a short time frame. This forced me to remain an active leader of discussions longer than anticipated.

Given the success of the pilot study and the limitations it presented, I went on to conduct a study that further explored RT and its use with first-graders. In the main study, a modified Reciprocal Teaching approach was implemented during whole-group read-alouds and then a focus group of four students practiced utilizing the strategies during small-group discussions. Through field notes and transcriptions of recorded data, I analyzed the impact these experiences had on student comprehension discussions.

Main Study

Participants

The subjects for this study were 21 first-grade students, eleven girls and ten boys. Six of these students were below grade level readers, eleven were at or near grade level, and four were above grade level as measured on an informal reading inventory. 18 of these students are Caucasian, two are African American, and 1 is Native American. A smaller focus group was chosen to participate in small-group instruction. This focus group consisted of four students of varying reading levels and comprehension abilities: Kathryn, Michael, Brianna, and Lara (all names are pseudonyms).

Setting and Materials

This study was conducted in an elementary school that serves 465 students ranging from kindergarten to 2nd grade in a small mid-western city. This school's student population was 78% white, with small percentages of students from Hispanic, Black, Native American or Asian backgrounds. There were nine sections of kindergarten, nine sections of first grade, and three sections of second grade. I am one of the nine first-grade teachers and I conducted this study

with my classroom students. This action research study was implemented during whole-group read-alouds and small-group discussions as part of a daily literacy block.

When introducing students to the four strategies that make up the RT approach, many fiction and non-fiction mentor texts were used. As the strategies and their corresponding characters were introduced, students were provided experiences with the props: a crystal ball, a magnifying glass, a microphone, and a cowboy hat and lasso. Chart paper and markers were also used to create an anchor chart that would serve as a reference throughout the study.

Procedures

After obtaining parent permission through a formal letter, I began to instruct students using an RT approach. To collect observational data, I recorded the frequency of student participation using a checklist with student names and took anecdotal notes during instructional periods. A computer webcam program was also used to document each small group session. The sessions were then transcribed at a later date using a word processor.

After my review of research and reflection on the needs of my first-grade students, it was evident that modifications to the RT approach were needed to successfully engage in this form of comprehension instruction. Student not only needed to understand what the strategies were and how to use them, they also needed to learn what appropriate discourse should sound like. In response, a series of lessons were created that addressed these challenges and provided students with an adequate amount of scaffolding to meet their needs. The descriptions below reflect this scaffolding.

Strategy Introduction

A critical factor when introducing first-grade students to RT is in the delivery. To spark interest in the strategies right away, it is necessary for the lessons to be fun and engaging. I did

this through the use of characters and props. These two additions to the traditional approach of RT not only served to engage the students' interest, they also assisted students in developing a concrete understanding of the abstract ideas presented in RT (Figure 2).

To fit the needs of the early elementary participants in this study, the four reading strategies were introduced through think-alouds, during whole-group instruction. Each day the students met a new character: Penelope the Predictor, Clarence the Clarifier, Quincy the Questioner, and Sammy the Summarizer. Using the story, *Stickeen: John Muir and the Brave Little Dog* (Muir & Rubay, 1998) and Kelley Stricklin's (2011) suggestions, I explicitly modeled the dialogue I hoped to eventually hear from the students. For example, when introducing the students to Penelope the Predictor I held a ball filled with glitter (snow globe) and in a fortune teller voice said,

Hello, I am Penelope the Predictor, and I make predictions about what might happen in the future. I love to make predictions about what is going to happen in books too. I am going to look at the cover of this book and make a prediction about what might happen in the story. I think that the man is John Muir and the little dog is Stickeen. I predict that Stickeen is going to save John Muir from falling. I think this because I see that there is a man hanging from an icy ledge and the dog is watching. What predictions do you have?

When introducing the students to Clarence the Clarifier I held up a magnifying glass and in detective voice I said,

Good morning, I am Clarence the Clarifier, and I like to solve mysteries. I look for clues that help me understand words that I can't read or don't understand. I see this word *crevasse* [hold magnifying glass up to the word]. I know I can get clues by reading before and after the word and looking at the pictures. I see that there is a big crack in the ice, so

a crevasse must be a deep crack. Sometimes I even have to interview people to find the answers. Can anyone tell me more about a crevasse?

When introducing the students to Quincy the Questioner I used a microphone and in a game show host voice said,

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the game show *I Know What We Just Read*, where you get the chance to ask and answer questions about the story. I'm your host Quincy the Questioner. When I ask questions I use words like who, what, where, why, how, and does. Who can answer my questions: What is the name of the dog in this story? [student answers correctly] That's right! Now who would like to try asking a who, what, where why, how, or does questions?

When introducing students to Randy the Reteller I put on a cowboy hat and then in a country drawl said,

Howdy, folks. I am Randy the Reteller and this is my retelling rope. I like to lasso cows, but I also like to lasso important information in the stories I read. When I lasso I try to catch information about the characters, the setting, the problem, and the solution in a story [point to the retelling rope anchor chart (Figure 3)].

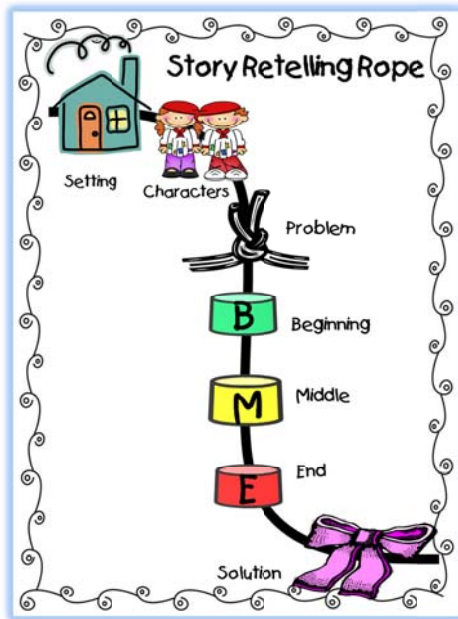


Figure 3. Retelling rope anchor chart. <http://firstgradewow.blogspot.com/2012/03/retelling-stories.html>

If there isn't a problem and solution, then I try to catch the most important things that happened in the beginning, middle, and the end of the story. While reading *Stickeen: John Muir and the Brave Little Dog* I lassoed that the setting took place in Alaska on a glacier and that the characters were John Muir and his dog *Stickeen*. I also lassoed that the problem was that John Muir and *Stickeen* got lost on the glacier and that *Stickeen* got stranded on the other side of a crevasse. I then lassoed the solution. The solution was that John Muir went across the ice bridge and cut off the sharp top so that *Stickeen* could get across. In the end of the story *Stickeen* made it across and they found their way back.

Each day as a closing review, the class created an anchor chart that was then utilized throughout the duration of the study. It should be noted that when modeling and creating an

anchor chart for each strategy it was imperative to identify the critical information. Due to the young age of my students I chose to simplify the strategies and limit the number of prompts presented and modeled. For example, when students were clarifying text it was more likely that they would encounter difficulties with decoding and vocabulary. Taking this into consideration, when students were clarifying they were instructed to find a word that was difficult to read or understand as opposed to clarifying an idea they found confusing (Medina & Pilonieta, 2009). The figure below is an example of the anchor chart created and used by the participants of this study, with the aforementioned simplified prompts.





<p>Penelope the Predictor</p>  <p>I predict ____ because ____.</p> <p>I think that ____ because ____.</p>	<p>Clarence the Clarifier</p>  <p>I didn't understand the word ____ so I ____.</p>
<p>Quincy the Questioner</p>  <p>Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? Does?</p>	<p>Randy the Reteller</p>  <p>Setting → Characters → Problem → Solution Beginning → Middle → End</p>

Figure 4. RT anchor chart.

Further RT Practice

A key component to making RT a success with first-grade students was the amount of scaffolding provided. It was necessary to maintain highly-scaffolded instruction for several months before reducing the scaffolding to allow for more independence (Hacker, et. al. 2002). I played an active role in discussions, often directly modeling a response and demonstrating what appropriate discourse would sound like. As time passed, students became more confident using the strategies and participating in discourse. In turn, responsibility began to shift and my role

became that of a facilitator. Instead of directly modeling for the students, I began to elicit responses from other students to support their peers when they needed assistance. This provided the rest of the students with opportunities to answer questions, give opinions, and offer suggestions to their peers when needed (Meyers, 2006).

As the study progressed and students were able to coordinate and apply the comprehension strategies successfully, another task was added to the RT routine. To set purpose for reading, students were asked to take a picture walk and share their background knowledge with the group. An example of this was when we read *Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs* (Willems, 2012). Before reading we took a picture walk through the first several pages and then students turned to their neighbor and shared what they already knew about Goldilocks stories. The information gathered during this time was referred back on as the story continued and aided students when they made their predictions.

RT in a Small-group

In addition to implementing RT in a whole-group setting, four students were chosen to participate in a focus group. This focus group met three times a week for twenty minutes and engaged in continued practice of RT. The format was very similar to that of the large-group instruction of RT with me reading the text and pausing throughout for students to practice using the strategies. I monitored and scaffolded each group member's progress while they performed each strategy, provided guidance to students who needed it, and focused the students' attention on pertinent information within the text (Medina & Pilonette, 2009).

A key factor in conducting the small group was teaching the students how to engage in successful discourse. This was done through direct modeling. For example, during session five I clearly stated how our conversation would sound. "Remember, we can have a conversation. So

Kathryn, it is okay if you want to talk. Michael, we just have to be respectful and wait until Kathryn is done before talking. So, let's have Kathryn go first. We are going to listen and make sure there is nothing we can add" (Video transcript, November 11). Over time, the students' group discourse skills improved, however, even during our last session the students found it helpful to raise their hands to let their peers know when they had something to contribute.

Data Collection and Analysis

To track the impact utilizing a RT approach with first-graders would have on comprehension, several methods of data collection were used. I completed transcriptions of three small-group discussions, one from each the beginning, middle, and the end of the study. These transcriptions were then analyzed at a later date to look for common occurrences and observable changes in comprehension.

I also recorded field notes over the course of the study. The main focus of these field notes was observation of the dialogue occurring within the context of our large-group interactions. These field notes provided valuable insight into the needs of my students. This information helped me to develop future lessons and adjust the amount of scaffolding students would receive. These notes were also analyzed at the conclusion of the study for common occurrences and observable changes in comprehension.

Findings and Discussion

Four main themes emerged from my retrospective analysis of the data: 1) Engagement and student participation; 2) Depth of student responses; 3) Accuracy of student responses; 4) Amount of teacher scaffolding needed.

Engagement and Student Participation

As recommended by the United States Department of Education, one component necessary for effective comprehension instruction is to establish an engaging and motivating context in which to teach reading comprehensions (Shanahan et. al., 2010). After implementing this study it was evident that this was achieved through the use of RT. The students were engaged by the characters and the props that represented each strategy. They were eager to get a chance to be the character and use their prop. During session ten of our small-group meetings, one student uttered the word “yeah!” when assigned the role of predictor and handed the predicting ball. This type of response was observed in the large-group setting as well. When the props were used, the amount of students raising their hands and wanting to share increased. This was a big change in comparison to the small number of students who were willing to share in large-group book discussions before the implementation of RT.

Depth of Student Responses

When analyzing field notes and small-group transcriptions a change in the depth of student responses was observed across implementation of the study. After engaging in RT, some of the students exhibited more complex responses as well as reasoning to support their thinking. The predictions demonstrated in the dialogue below show how the responses changed over time in both the large-group and the small-group setting.

Large-group. According to field notes collected during week two of the large-group study, three predictions that occurred were void of details and utilized pronouns as opposed to characters names (Table 1). According to the field notes collected during week four of the large-group study, three predictions occurred that included details and showed evidence of higher-level reasoning.

Table 1:

Large Group Predictions

Predictions Week 2	Predictions Week 4
“I think the dog will fall.”	“I think that the dinosaurs are going to come and then the little girl will pretend to be asleep when they get there and she will run away.”
“I think that they will leave him.”	“I think that when the dinosaurs come she is going to hide under the covers because dinosaurs are big and she is so small.”
“I think they will die.”	“I predict it is a princess because his mom already embarrassed him in the beginning of the story.”

Small-group. According to the video transcript collected on October 23, 2013 a prediction was made that made little sense and included no reasoning. The video transcript collected on November 11, 2013 shows a student using details from the story to form a

prediction. In the video transcript from November 20, 2013 a student made a prediction that included many details and also showed signs of higher level reasoning.

Table 2:

Small-group Predictions

<p>Video transcript October 23, 2013</p>	<p>Video transcript November 11, 2013</p>	<p>Video transcript November 20, 2013</p>
<p>“Umm, I predict that I think that they umm back in the 70’s they would like to make instruments to make drums.”</p>	<p>“I think that he is gonna, he is gonna, um, he is gonna follow his footprints back to the home and he is gonna find his papa and mama.”</p>	<p>“They move a lot and I think that he is going to build a cave and he is gonna, he is gonna, find someone and I think the bears are going to be off and they are going to move a lot. Because it says in the beginning in the title of the book that Polar Bears on the Move.”</p>

Accuracy of Student Responses

After consideration of the data I observed that the accuracy of student responses was also impacted when students were exposed to an RT approach to comprehension. Initially, the students were eager to use the new props and share, however their responses were not always accurate. When looking back on the transcription of small-group session one, many

misconceptions were observed. For example, when asked to retell a portion of a non-fiction text about schools today and school in the past, the student's response was:

“Um, trees in the colonies um, were um, they were long, but um, some were really short, shorter than some of the trees that are a little big. Now they're really big, but it is a little bit kinda. It's not bunched up like the normal, like now, but now it's going to be like, it's going to be little but you can't lift it up like the others” (Video transcript, October 23).

This response was lengthy yet does not include any details from the story. It lacks focus and is difficult to understand. The dialogue from the video transcription collected on November 11, demonstrates how with continued exposure to RT, responses became more clear and accurate.

Kathryn: That he, he, couldn't find his home and, and, he was, he was sad, and, and, he found the feather, and, then he went back. And then he, he, can't find his home anymore.

Teacher: Okay, let's see. Does anyone have anything to add that maybe Kathryn forgot or didn't say?

Michael: I am using the retelling rope.

Teacher: Now remember what she's already said, because she already said part of it. You tell the stuff she might have forgotten. We are going to be a team here.

Michael: Okay. The setting was actually in snow. And the characters was Little Pip, the mother, the father. The problem was like that he was stuck in the North Pole and then the starting, it was learning about what they did and the second, I mean middle, Little Pip got lost and at the end, we don't know (Video transcript, November 11).

In contrast to the retelling recorded in the initial video transcript, the above dialogue shows evidence of students using successful discourse techniques to retell the story. The students shared a retelling that included many relevant details; the characters, the setting, and the

problem. The retelling included accurate information gathered from the story. These qualitative data provided evidence that as students engage in RT practices over time, they build their confidence in the strategies. As confidence is developed, the responses become more accurate.

Amount of Teacher Scaffolding Needed

After engaging in RT for six weeks, it was apparent that the students still needed a great deal of scaffolding in both large-group and small-group discussions. The main change over time was in the delivery of the scaffolding. When first practicing RT the discussion were predominantly teacher led, with me explicitly modeling desired behaviors and dialogue. This change over time can be observed in the video transcription collected on October 23, 2013.

Teacher: Boys and girls, if I were sharing my background knowledge I might tell you that I know that in the past they had kids in one classroom that were in kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade all in the same classroom and now it is different because I have all first graders in my classroom... (Video transcript, October 23, 2013).

As students demonstrated an increased competence using the strategies, I continued modeling explicitly and began asking students questions to encourage participation and guide conversation. The dialogue below occurred in the video transcription collected on November 11, 2013.

Kate: There was a part in here where I read the word plumb. There was a huge plumb in the sea and I didn't understand what that word meant. One trick is that I can ask my friends. Do you guys think you could help me? What do you think a plumb might be? [Brianna raises her hand] Brianna, what do you think a plumb might be?

Brianna: A plumb is like, um, um, when you can see something is coming up and you can like see his face but sometimes you can't see it if it is really far down. But if it is like really far up you can see like the face and stuff.

Kate: ...When we look at the pictures that is kind of what I see. I see water coming up and the head coming up. (Video transcript, November 11)

As the students had opportunities for continued practice using RT strategies, the teacher's focus was to scaffold conversations between the students. The dialogue is an excerpt from the video transcript collected on November 20, 2013.

Kate: Let's go now to our reteller. Can you tell us what this section was about?

Lara: Polar bears.

Kate: See if you can think back to what we practiced this morning. Can you give us some more information? You're right that it was about polar bears. Maybe, just like we helped as a team this morning, can you guys help Lara out? What did we read about in this section? Call on your friends for help.

Lara: Kathryn

Kathryn: Um. [pause] I forgot.

Lara: Brianna?

Brianna: Um, what did you ask again?

Kate: She was my reteller and so far she said we read about polar bears.

Brianna: Ooo, um, that um um the polar bear um was um getting out of the little hole um um didn't see the day light for months. (Video transcript, November 20, 2013)

This qualitative evidence shows that a key component to successful scaffolding with first-graders is through the modeling of discourse. Over time students were able to take on more

responsibility in conversations and in turn, were able to work together to coordinate the RT strategies.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several factors limited the effectiveness of this study--the greatest of these being a short implementation period. Implementing a true RT approach requires extensive interactive modeling, and continued opportunities to practice using the strategies before students are ready to transition into a leadership role over many months. Even after engaging in RT for six weeks, discussions were still highly-scaffolded and I was required to maintain an active role in discussions for the duration of the study. The short time frame of this study and the young age of my students made it difficult to clearly determine the extent first-grade students could utilize RT. It was not explicitly clear if engaging in RT for a longer period of time would allow first-grade students to take on the responsibility of leading discussions. Further research needs to be conducted, where all students engage in continued practice of the strategies in a small-group setting, to make concrete decisions about the effectiveness of this practice.

Time also impacted the text that I was able to use with my students in our small-group discussions. In traditional RT approaches, students read text independently and then practice using the four strategies to make meaning from what has been read. In contrast, during the extent of this study, I chose texts to read aloud to the students. Due to the short time frame of this study we were not able to transition to student-read text. The participants needed time to increase their reading skills and strategies in order to decode and make meaning of complex text independently.

Although RT was shown to impact comprehension when used with first-graders, it is imperative to consider the age of students and their attention span when implementing

instructional strategy in the classroom. My young students, although engaged initially, began to lose interest as the study progressed. I found that students were more engaged in RT during whole-group read-alouds and small-group discussions when this method was used in conjunction with other comprehension techniques. When used only two or three times a week, my students remained excited about read-aloud time and participation stayed high.

Lastly, the limited number of participants in the focus group impacted the reliability of the data collected. This action research was conducted within the confines of my classroom and focused particularly on a group of only four students. For future studies, reliability could be increased if a larger number of participants in a variety of contexts were included. Additionally, an experimental design reporting quantitative data on student comprehension could enhance this line of research.

Implications

In closing, this study sought to determine if using a RT approach with first-grade students would impact comprehension. It explored the modifications made to traditional RT; focusing specifically on the areas of engagement, scaffolding, and the usage of small-groups.

My findings correlated with the research that using an RT approach with first graders could impact comprehension. After analyzing my findings, it was clear that comprehension was impacted in four main areas: 1) Engagement and student participation; 2) Depth of student responses; 3) Accuracy of student responses; 4) Amount of teacher scaffolding needed. In each of these areas, I observed positive changes.

It became clear that, in contrast to RT with older students, younger students need to be engaged in scaffolded instruction for a much longer amount of time. Much of this extra scaffolded time was spend focusing specifically on scaffolding student discourse. After engaging

in RT for six-weeks I noticed that explicit modeling of conversation skills and RT language was still needed for students to successfully engage in both small-group and large-group discourse. Further research is needed, in which students continue to engage in this highly-scaffolded discourse, to determine if it is possible for students to eventually to engage in these conversations independently. This added time for data collection would provide more conclusive results about how student conversations would be impacted.

This action research offers anecdotal findings that using an RT approach with first-grade students can impact the depth and accuracy of student responses when engaging in comprehension discussions. These are qualities often overlooked when using qualitative measures of comprehension, yet were shown in this study to be highly impactful to student comprehension as they engaged deeper with the text.

Students develop stronger discourse and build confidence in their ability to communicate and coordinate the RT reading strategies. This encourages students to share their knowledge and support each other in their learning. Using a modified RT approach blends comprehension and conversation and can be utilized with our youngest students to impact their learning.

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