TIERED TEXTS — A LADDER TO READING REMEDIATION

Mediating Middle School Students' Comprehension Difficulties

through Accommodated Texts

A research report submitted to the

Yale-Lynn Hall Teacher Action Research Prize Committee

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January 31, 2011

ABSTRACT (EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

The results of this academic intervention demonstrate how the use of tiered texts permits students of varying reading abilities to access grade-level texts. The outcomes for these students over a six-week trial period demonstrate that students who were previously not making grade level progress, including students classified as English language learners (ELL) or diagnosed with language-based learning disabilities (LD), can substantially improve their ability to function in the general education classroom. The study is mixed methods, and includes both the researcher's observations of students' behavior in the classroom and evaluation of work, as well as a quantitative component using data gathered from curriculum-based and vendor-provided reading assessments. The results demonstrated that tiered texts benefited students' comprehension of classroom texts, motivation for reading, and metacognitive skills essential to broad reading comprehension.

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The idea of cloning myself never held much appeal to me until I became a teacher. In the midst of a bustling classroom, the potential benefits were suddenly made manifest: there were too many students reading far below grade level, and not nearly enough time in the day for me to help them all. During my first year teaching fifth grade English to a large class of struggling fifth graders at Excel Academy Charter School in East Boston, I realized the particular challenge in attempting to remediate reading deficiencies in the early middle school years. As observed by Cain and Oakhill (2007) in their studies of children's reading comprehension difficulties, as students mature and are called upon to read texts that put a greater emphasis on indirect language to describe events, phonics-based reading comprehension skills become increasingly subordinated to inferential thinking skills. Students who struggle to make this transition begin to experience reading failures (Oakhill and Cain, 2007) — an effect commonly known as "the fourth-grade slump." A proposed remedy is more explicit metacognitive instruction and more frequent and varied assessments (The National Reading Panel, 2002). Classroom-based assessment models, however, can often only be administered as a posttest and thus only evaluate the effectiveness of the students' cognitive comprehension *after* it has taken place. In addition, while assessments can do much to inform an instructor of students' specific reading deficiencies in a given text, they do not necessarily help the students develop an awareness of their deficiencies or develop the skills they need to successfully remediate them.

With reliable cloning technology still prohibitively expensive, I turned then, in my first year, to teaching explicit metacognitive skills to build more meaningful reading comprehension. I focused my instruction on higher order, strategic processing. This hews closely to Barbara Ehren's research (2004), which found the most effective metacognitive instruction focused on developing students' abilities to first actively monitor their understanding. Ehren's work supports teaching a specific metacognitive strategy, modeling its use, and then measuring students' use of the taught strategy to determine the instruction's effectiveness (p. 651). This seemed a fine recommendation for in-class reading and assessment, but 5th graders also need to learn to be fully functioning *independent* readers. My question became how to ensure that my struggling students successfully internalize and transfer the explicit metacognitive instruction they receive in my classroom instruction to their independent reading experiences. All I needed to do was find a way to be with every struggling reader at once to make sure each one was using the strategies as they had been instructed to do in order to access the text.

A logical conclusion presented itself one day while I was at the photocopier: instead of cloning myself, I could copy my reading thought processes into the text. In this manner, I could model the metacognitive strategies a good reader used side-by-side with the text — embedding, modeling, and applying the strategies a reader applies automatically when reading. The independent reading text would therefore also become an instructional text — that is, an extension of the daily reading instruction I provided in the classroom. Through this intervention, I hoped that my struggling readers would be finally able to access grade-level texts that had heretofore been prohibitively difficult for them. With nothing to lose but time, I started designing the tiered texts and making copies. The intervention described below represents the first step in a year-long multi-pronged remediation effort to help our lowest readers move towards reading proficiency.

RESEARCH SUPPORTING THE INTERVENTION

Recent research focused on struggling readers supports the use of the tiered text intervention because of its potential to improve student motivation, reading comprehension, metacognitive awareness, and incidental word acquisition.

Increasing Students Motivation in the Reading Process

The tiered texts, by design, improve a student's motivation to read the text by making the text more accessible. Guthrie & Humenick (2004) define motivation as being engaged in a task, and further add that motivation

exists on a spectrum affected primarily by intrinsic and extrinsic goals for reading and the reader's sense of self efficacy (p. 330). The tiered text intervention is designed to speak to a reader's intrinsic goals and build her sense of self efficacy in the reading process. First, tiered texts build intrinsic motivation in the reading process because they directly engage a student to deepen her understanding of the text. Question prompts, cloze sentences, highlighting tasks, and multiple-choice questions set intrinsic goals for reading, thus drawing the reader into the task in front of her. Second, tiered texts build the reader's sense of self efficacy by making the meaning of the story more accessible for the struggling reader who has found reading grade-level texts a baffling and frustrating experience. Success in reading builds a student's sense of self-efficacy, which Guthrie & Humenick identify as an essential characteristic of the motivated reader who will work to sustain his attention and therefore not easily become discouraged when the reading becomes more difficult (p. 331).

Enhancing Students Reading Comprehension

Of the six key strategies for cognitive comprehension identified by Brown (2008), the tiered text intervention would aid in or support the development of asking oneself questions; constructing mental images; summarizing; and clarifying and using "fix-it" strategies to rectify confusion.

Nell Duke (2004) is explicit about the value of teaching such metacognitive strategies to struggling readers. Good instruction, she says, teaches and models for students the same strategies good readers use for comprehension; and, the gradual release of responsibility is very effective in promoting students with learning disabilities' reading comprehension (p. 512). The use of the tiered texts and their place within the instructional framework of my curriculum align closely with these recommendations.

The strategies modeled to the students during class, and their incorporation into the instruction and design of the tiered texts, are also research based. These included the explicit modeling by the teacher of metacognitive strategies, including self-monitoring for comprehension, asking questions of the students to guide the reading, making predictions, and revisiting them (Schumaker, Deshler, Nolan, & Alley, 1994, as cited in Vaughn & Klingner, 2004, p. 543). Additionally, the use of "Who + What + 'b/c'" serves as a means of improving students' summarizing abilities (Malone & Mastropieri, 1992; Schumaker, Denton & Deshler, 1984, as cited in Vaughn & Klingner, 2004, p. 545). Finally, the completion of cloze sentences from given information helps students build inference-making skills (Bos, 1987, as cited in Vaughn & Klingner, 2004, p. 545).

Aiding Students Who Struggle with Metacognition

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to comprehension for struggling readers is not the lack of strategy use, but misapplication of the strategies (Duke, 2004). Duke reminds us that good readers not only know *how* to make good inferences, but *when* to make them (p. 503). The tiered texts therefore help students stay focused on the big picture in the text by directing them to make connections at key moments in the story. This model for inference-making helps the student develop these skills without getting overwhelmed by the possibilities. In particular, Duke recommends such interactive book reading for students who are classified as ELL, noting that engaging ELL students in conversations about the books they read helps build comprehension (p. 509). While the tiered text is *not* a surrogate for the teacher in the classroom, a tiered text does allow for a student's independent reading experiences to become a direct and consistent extension of the teacher's in-class instruction.

Additionally, the tiered texts' focus on modeling metacognitive processes has a potentially powerful effect on students classified as LD. In most classroom environments, these students are more likely to be asked to focus on word recognition than comprehension, and spend less time reading authentic texts than their peers (Walmsley & Allington, 1995). Walmsley and Allington recommend explicit metacognitive instruction for LD students based on their principle that "all students deserve to be held to the same literacy experiences" (Walmsley, 1995, p. 28). They conclude that if students struggle to think actively as they read, then they require explicit modeling and instruction by their teachers in order to access these higher-order thinking skills, which are critical to meaningful understanding of texts (p. 33). The tiered texts intervention strives to ensure all students receive the same educational experience, while also helping to provide students classified as LD additional explicit modeling of the metacognitive processes required to access a grade-level text.

Improving Students' Incidental Word Learning

Swanborn and De Glopper (1999) estimated that, as readers, we have approximately a 15% chance to learn unknown words from context; however, reading texts that are too difficult decreases this likelihood. Thus, providing vocabulary definitions next to unknown words helps ensure that the most struggling readers — who all too often lack grade-level vocabulary — receive support in their incidental word acquisition. Additionally, Swanborn and De Glopper found that students who had been taught word parts and context clue strategies (i.e., metacognitive strategies for identifying the meaning of unfamiliar words) had a higher likelihood of learning and retaining unknown words encountered in their reading (p. 269). Swanborn and De Glopper's meta-analysis supports the inclusion of vocabulary definitions in student-friendly language in the tiered texts intervention. Additionally, their conclusions argue in favor

of teaching metacognitive context clue strategies in conjunction with the tiered texts, in order to maximize incidental word learning potential (p. 280).[1]

DESCRIPTION OF THE GROUP OF STUDENTS AND SCHOOL IN THE INTERVENTION

Student Profile

The study focuses on the reading experiences of 54 fifth grade students at Excel Academy Charter School in East Boston. Seven students have diagnosed learning disabilities; four additional students are currently undergoing evaluation by the 5th grade child study team, likely to result in the finding of a learning disability. While more than 50% of students report speaking a language other than English at home, only one student is officially classified as ELL (scoring "Intermediate" on the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment).

The students were divided into three tiers of interventions. 11 students received the third tier (T3, or "severe") intervention; 12 students received the second-tier (T2 or "moderate") intervention; 31 students received the first-tier (T1 or "null") intervention. The division of students into groups was based on the following factors and data such as students' Stanford 10 reading comprehension battery scores[2], performance on the Achievement Network six-week assessment[3], and current performance on reading assessments in 5th grade English. An addition consideration for tier selection included whether students required significant support from the special education and ELL teachers.

School Profile

Excel Academy serves 212 students, grades 5-8, of which 70% are low-income, 70% are Latino, and 50% are Spanish speaking at home. These students are drawn mainly from the East Boston and Chelsea communities. Excel Academy is a tuition-free public charter school; students are chosen through a lottery and there are no admissions criteria. The students roughly represent their sending communities, though they have slightly fewer special education needs, and have a slightly higher percentage of Caucasian students.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TYPES OF TEXTS USED

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[1] All students were given a dictionary, and taught and expected to use it, but I found that the most struggling students struggled with alphabetic awareness and had to spend too much time looking up words. This accommodation thus became a more accessible glossary they could access easily while reading.

[2] According to the Stanford 10 beginning of year assessment, approximately two-thirds of students entered Excel Academy in 5th grade reading at or below an early fourth-grade level. Approximately one-third of entering students read below a fourth-grade level.

[3] Achievement Network (ANet) is an assessment company used by Excel Academy, Massachusetts charter schools and Massachusetts public schools classified as "turnaround" by NCLB to measure progress towards improving achievement in reading and math. According to ANet's beginning of year assessment, more than two-thirds of Excel Academy's incoming 5th grade students were considered in danger of scoring "Needs Improvement" and "Warning" on their upcoming 2011 5th grade MCAS.

In this study, three class texts were used: "Paul Bunyan," "Johnny Appleseed," and "Davy Crockett." I selected each tall tale from Mary Pope Osborne's compilation of *American Tall Tales.* The stories are retellings of the lives of famous characters responsible for some aspect of American expansion in the 1800s. The stories are told in folksy tone, employ idiomatic expressions, figurative and imaginative language. They feature exaggerated character traits and outrageous problems and solutions. Lexile scores the stories at 970L, which corresponds roughly to a fifth-grade reading level (Lexile, 2010). Consequently, most students in the class would struggle to meaningfully access this grade-level text barring some level of remediation.

DESCRIPTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL ROUTINES

This intervention was conducted from October 25th, 2010 to November 24th, 2010. This timeframe allowed for 20 instructional days (or approximately four weeks) and two days for assessment. The description of the routines over this time is therefore described over the course of that period.

During the first week of the intervention, "Paul Bunyan" was read. As I would do with each tall tale, whole class instruction included the modeling of metacognitive strategies (e.g., making predictions based on pictures in the story, making connections to the history of the characters we learned about, visualizing the figurative language in order to identify and explain it, and so on). Students were asked to work with their partners to read the next few pages and use the same strategies and "teacher talk" to describe to their partner how the strategies helped them make deeper connections to the text. During the second week of the intervention, students read "Johnny Appleseed" and continued to practice the aforementioned metacognitive strategies during class. During the third week, students read "Davy Crockett." This week included instruction on cause and effect, and the class looked back at all the tall tales to practice making connections between their outrageous problems and their unlikely solutions. During the fourth week, we practiced making inferences in the story about the various characters' traits based on actions; we identified more cause and effect relationships that were not explicitly stated in the texts; finally, we inferred details about the setting based on textual clues. The final week consisted of skill review practice and the two-part Tall Tale end-of-unit test.

DESCRIPTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

The tiered texts intervention incorporated the Massachusetts Department of Education 5th grade English standards[4] while also modeling effective metacognitive reading strategy instruction. Simultaneously, my instruction incorporated many Massachusetts standards from grades 1 – 4, plus additional background on American history and geography in order to build students' prior knowledge. The tall tales unit included the explicit instruction of a number of metacognitive skills fifth graders were expected to master by the end of the unit. Some of the standards addressed in the tiered texts included identifying and explaining a character's traits, cause and effect relationships at the syntactical and event level, and the use of figurative language in tall tales. Additionally, students were challenged throughout this unit to make reasonable inferences through connecting pieces of evidence in the text and applying prior knowledge.

Description of the T1 Text

Students who received the T1 intervention read a version of the text without accommodations for homework. On a separate sheet of paper they wrote down the main ideas for each paragraph they read using the "Who + What + b/c" strategy. This strategy was taught in September to assist in students generating accurate main ideas from the paragraphs and pages assigned during independent reading.[5]

Description of the T2 Text

The T2 intervention consisted of creating binders with photocopied versions of the text featuring expanded margins. In these margins, I wrote guiding questions specific to the actions or events on the page. Students who received the T2 intervention were taught that they must answer these questions in their head before they could go on reading the story. If they could not, they were instructed to reread until they could. The T2 text also supported incidental vocabulary acquisition by offering several highlighted vocabulary words on every page, along with basic definitions.

Description of the T3 Text

The T3 intervention, as with the T2, consisted of creating binders with photocopied versions of the text featuring expanded margins. Importantly – and unlike the other interventions described thus far – the T3 intervention

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[4] The Tall Tale Unit incorporates the following Massachusetts 5th grade English standards: 9.4, 10.3, 12.3, 8.20, 12 (sup.).
[5] Students use this strategy to aid in the identification of the main actor and action for an assigned section, then attempt to explain why this event happened by making a connection to some other explicit or implicit event in the story.

replaced the students' normal English homework. For this reason the T3 was designed like a workbook and allowed students to interact with the text *as they read*. Students who received the T3 were instructed to first read the page, and then answer the questions written on the margin of the page. Similar to the T2 intervention, if the student could not answer the questions, they were cued to go back and reread. *Unlike* the T2 intervention, the questions in the T3 intervention were rarely open-ended. Instead, they asked students to fill in cloze sentences, highlight relevant passages, or select from multiple-choice options. This format allowed the students to complete the work quickly without getting distracted from the story; additionally — and importantly for the teacher — the T3 provided a running record of the child's comprehension of each passage she read. This allowed the instructor (either a special education teacher or me) to provide quick remediation of independent reading difficulties. Finally, the T3 intervention contained extensive footnotes to aid in incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Assessment Routines

I used two types of assessments and all students participated in them. First, students were assessed with a multiple-choice "reading check" of four summary-level questions from the previous night's reading. This quick evaluation of the student's independent reading comprehension was graded as a class and used to guide teaching decisions that day. Next, at the midpoint of a book or after a particularly salient event in the narrative, students were assessed through a more rigorous "reading quiz." In addition to answering main idea multiple choice questions, students were also asked to apply their close reading skills to a selected passage of the text we had not yet dissected as a class. On reading quizzes (unlike reading checks), students were asked inferential questions. Two versions of this quiz were created; students receiving the T3 intervention also received the same guiding questions provided in their texts to aid in comprehension of the reading quiz and end-of-unit passages.

DOCUMENTING EFFECTIVENESS OF INSTRUCTION

To determine the efficacy of my intervention, I used two data points: the improvement in students' performances between the Achievement Network's A1 and A2 assessments (given at approximately the beginning and ending of the intervention period), and the Tall Tales end-of-unit test, which I wrote and designed to assess many of the same skills the tiered texts were intended to help mediate. Between these two data points, a composite emerges illustrating the effectiveness of tiered texts as a suitable intervention to improve reading comprehension for students reading moderately or significantly below grade level.

Tall Tale End-of-Unit Test

This test represented the synthesis of reading comprehension and skill practice students had developed over the course of the unit. In particular, the test asked students to demonstrate their mastery of identifying and explaining examples of figurative language while reading tall tales; using close reading skills to answer multiple-choice questions about short passages; applying knowledge of the tall tale genre to an excerpt from a new text: "Pecos Bill;" generating accurate main ideas about "Pecos Bill;" and identifying and describing cause and effect relationships at the syntactical and narrative levels.

Based on a random sample of students from the respective tier groups, student performance was analyzed to generate the following results. Student performance on the Unit Test overall was strong. The class average was 83%, which demonstrated the fifth graders' overall competence in performing the comprehension tasks described above. This average, however, does not characterize the growth of the students who received the T2 and T3 interventions. Here, the results demonstrate that tiered texts helped the students make significant progress toward reading skill mastery despite these students reading, on average, two grade levels lower than their T1 classmates, T2 performance on the Tall Tales Unit Test was only 7% less than T1's (T1 subgroup average: 88%, T2 subgroup average: 81%). T3 students were further behind (T3 subgroup average of 73%). Without a pretest to compare, these numbers may seem to indicate strong disparities in the accuracy and quality of the respective tiers' overall comprehension. The results nonetheless demonstrate that all student groups had appreciable comprehension of a fifth-grade level text.

Achievement Network A2 Assessment

The Achievement Network A2 Assessment measured students' abilities to answer questions about context clues, parts of speech, inferences, facts and details, and main ideas through grade-level fiction and nonfiction texts. The students read the passages and answered multiple-choice reading comprehension questions, similar in length and format to the 5th grade ELA MCAS. Students' performances on the Achievement Network assessment were particularly relevant for the purposes of this intervention because students had taken the A1 assessment one week before the intervention and the A2 one week after. The A2 results, therefore, provided a means by which to measure student growth over the intervention period. In addition, the A1 and A2 assessments are not "tiered" as my classroom texts; thus, they could also demonstrate the transferability of the skills students learned from reading tiered texts to non-accommodated ones.

Overall, students' performances on the Achievement Network six-week assessments increased from pre- to post-intervention. The overall class average on the A1 was 69%; on the A2 it improved to 74%[6]. Whereas 10 students were determined to be in danger of failing the MCAS based on A1 results, on the A2, only four students were now considered to be in danger of failing. Similarly, the number of students in danger of scoring "Needs Improvement" had dropped from 27 to 15. Even more encouraging, the number of students determined likely to score "Proficient" had risen from 27 to 38, while students likely to score "Advanced" had jumped from four to 16.[7]

CONCLUSIONS

Despite being unable to control for a number of confounding variables (additional afterschool literacy supports and explicit reading comprehension instruction in science class during the course of the intervention are just two examples), students did appear to benefit from the tiered text intervention — both as an aid for their immediate comprehension of the particular texts they read, and as a means of building their metacognitive skills. In particular, T2 and T3 students' comprehension and skills saw the greatest growth, particularly as measured by ANet from A1 to A2. T2 students' performance rose from 59% to 76% by this measure; T3 performance increased from 49% to 57%. While T2 and T3 students still have a long way to go to reach grade-level proficiency, the gains represented by the six-week jump in ANet performance suggest that the intervention has accelerated students' reading growth, and put grade-level reading proficiency within reach.

At the conclusion of the intervention, sampled T2 and T3 students made remarkable growth as student groups; however, they still remained, as groups, the lowest readers in the grade. Many of them still require tiered texts and the help of the special education teachers to continue making adequate progress in reading comprehension. This is to be expected. A four-week tiered text intervention is highly unlikely to mediate reading difficulties that have developed over the course of ten-to-eleven years of language experience and five-to-six years of reading experience. Clearly, there is no "magic bullet" for reading remediation; however, tiered texts demonstrate their potential to be a valuable ally in aiding poor readers' comprehension, helping them to develop a powerful repertoire of metacognitive skills, and deepen their understanding of texts.

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[6] On the A0, administered at the beginning of the year, the incoming 5th graders averaged 49%.
[7] These numbers generally approximate students' performance and rate of improvement from this time last year who also received the tiered-text intervention. On the 2010 ELA MCAS, 100% of these students passed the exam and 91% scored "Advanced" or "Proficient" and 49% of students scored "Advanced."

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