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The impact of teacher prompting and questioning on third grade students' comprehension

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THE IMPACT OF TEACHER PROMPTING AND QUESTIONING ON THIRD GRADE

STUDENTS' COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explores how teacher prompting and questioning impacts students' comprehension of texts. The researcher observed a third grade teacher, Mrs. G., at a local elementary school in order to discern patterns in how this teacher used verbal prompts and questions to assist her students in understanding what they read. An initial interview was conducted with Mrs. G. to determine how she typically teaches and assesses reading comprehension, as well as the types of verbal prompts and questions she utilizes to assist students in comprehension. The researcher observed two literacy lessons in which Mrs. G. instructed the whole class as well as small groups of students. An analysis of these observations revealed Mrs. G's use of academic language as well as explicit modeling or thinking aloud as a means to aid students in their reading comprehension. These patterns were confirmed through analysis of the data by multiple sources, including Mrs. G's comments, and are evident in the literature. Recommendations for educators linked to this study include using academic language to label and discuss various reading comprehension strategies, as well as modeling reading comprehension strategies by thinking aloud in an effort to support students' understanding of when and how to implement particular strategies to aid in their understanding of texts.

Key Words: reading comprehension, academic language, modeling, third grade

Introduction

Teaching students to understand what they read is essential if students are to be successful in school and in life. Reading comprehension can be broadly defined as, "understanding, using, reflecting on, and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society" (Kendeou, 2014, p.10). Reading comprehension instruction, therefore, provides students with the strategies that are necessary to understand what they read and to use knowledge gained from texts to accomplish meaningful goals.

In addition to its positive effect on students' ability to be successful both in and out of school, the importance of reading comprehension is also being recognized by state legislators. As of February 2015, more than 30 states have passed third grade reading laws (Casey, 2015). These laws "set standards for how well third-grade students must be performing in reading to move on to fourth grade" (Casey, 2015, n.p.). Soon, Iowa will join these states in setting standards for third grade reading performance. Beginning in May 2017, new legislation in the state of Iowa will require third graders who are not reading on grade level by spring of their third grade year to repeat the grade or attend summer school (Iowa Department of Education). With this new regulation comes increasing pressure for students to comprehend texts at a high level.

It is clear that students must learn to comprehend what they have read, but it is important to consider how they develop those skills. Teachers play a large role in fostering the skills and strategies necessary for effective reading comprehension. In one study, "second through fifth graders showed dramatically different rates of growth in reading comprehension over the course of the school year, depending on their teacher and the specific practices in which he or she engaged," (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011, p. 51). Reading comprehension skills and

strategies for teachers to support include: predicting, setting a purpose for reading, activating

prior knowledge, visualizing, inferencing, and making connections (Duke et al., 2011). Given the

importance of reading comprehension to students' success as well as the central role that teachers

have in fostering and developing those comprehension skills, it is crucial that teachers

understand what types of questions and prompts they can provide to support their students'

understanding of texts they are reading. Recent legislation related to third grade retention places

an even higher demand on students to comprehend at high levels and for teachers to support

students in developing reading comprehension skills with quality instruction. The focus of this

qualitative research project, therefore, was to describe the impact of teacher questioning and

prompting on students' comprehension of texts. The researcher observed a third grade teacher at

a local elementary school in order to discern patterns in how this teacher used verbal prompts

and questions to assist her students in understanding what they read. A review of the literature

related to questioning, prompting and discussion, and reading comprehension strategies follows.

Literature Review

Questioning

There are several ways in which teachers help students gain reading comprehension

skills. According to Van Jura (1982), "questioning is the most accessible of all methods involved

in teaching reading comprehension" (p. 214). Teachers should use questions not only to assess

students' understanding of texts, but also to facilitate it (Allington, 2012). Indeed, Beck and

McKeown (1981) reported that questions about texts read can serve either to "determine whether

students have understood the text" or to "aid in the development of comprehension if it does not

take place spontaneously during reading" (p. 913). Used appropriately, discussion can be a

powerful tool to further students' comprehension of what has been read. As VanDeWeghe (2007) stated, "Effective approaches based on organization of classroom discourse and implemented through small-group work and whole-class discussion do result in measurable gains in reading comprehension" (p. 90). Asking students questions about what they have read before, during, and after reading helps focus their thinking and facilitates their understanding. Furthermore, the types of questions provided shape how students think about texts they read and influence what type of information students view as important (Duke & Pearson, 2008). Teachers should use questioning and discussion to draw students' attention to important events and elements of the text (Beck & McKeown, 1981).

The way in which teachers organize discussion and the types of questions they ask is crucial to students' development of comprehension. Nystrand reported that in classrooms where time is spent on authentic discussions, in which students are asked open-ended questions designed to help them make connections and solve problems related to what they read, students' level of reading comprehension is higher (2006). According to Duke and Pearson (2008), these discussions should include "clarifying basic material stated in the text, drawing interpretations of text material, and relating the text to other texts, experiences, and reading goals" (p. 108). Teachers should move beyond asking literal questions about texts; they should include questions that encourage students to make inferences, evaluate and analyze information, and appreciate or relate to the text (Beck & Mckeown, 1981). Discussion about texts based on teacher-provided prompts and questions is a necessary facilitator of student understanding of texts. It is, however, important to understand what types of discussion formats can be used in an attempt to support student comprehension.

Prompting and Discussion

Traditionally, teacher-student interaction has taken the form of Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE). In this format, "a teacher initiates the interaction by asking a question, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates that response" (Porath, 2014, p. 627). This is problematic because in this format, students do not take an active role in constructing knowledge. Indeed, Johnston argued that the IRE format is "very controlling" in that it sends students the message that "the teacher already knows what needs to be known and therefore takes the role of judging the quality of the student's response, positioning the teacher in the role of authority and knowledge giver" (Johnston, 2004, p. 54). Porath argued that conversations about texts are more effective when teachers "involve the student in creating a shared and dynamic understanding of the student's reading interests and processes" in order to better learn from the student and to make student thinking visible (Porath, 2014, p. 627). Engaging students in conversations about texts that have been read helps to deepen teachers' understanding of students' reading processes and thinking about texts. (Porath, 2014). Allington (2012) referred to this process as having "literate conversations" with students. He stated that "literate conversations do not have to begin with a teacher question. They might begin with a teacher (or student) comment about what is being read" (p. 154). This may include statements such as, "Did anyone else notice…?" Or "I wonder…" This creates a collaborative classroom environment in which students and the teacher work together to build an understanding of the text.

Teachers can also use discussion to help bridge gaps they find in students' thinking. When teachers discover errors or gaps in students' thinking about texts, it is necessary to intervene in order to support comprehension. Clark and Graves (2005) described "moment-to-moment verbal scaffolding" as one way in which teachers can use dialogue to support students'

comprehension. They stated that "the teacher's role is to prompt students, ask probing questions, and elaborate student responses in the course of instruction" (p. 572). Nystrand also reported that discussion is most helpful when "students themselves are actively involved in signaling their problems and in trying to solve them" (2006, p. 399).

Other researchers agreed that students should take an active role in discussions. Erdogan and Campbell (2008) explained that teachers who use a constructivist approach to teaching encourage students to respond to open-ended teacher questions and share ideas with peers, rather than remaining dependent on the teacher for information. Duke and Pearson (2008) agreed that classrooms should include "both teacher-to-student and student-to-student talk" (p.108). While most teachers do realize the value of peer discussion in helping their students understand what they read, Nystrand (2006) reported that only 33% of teachers regularly make room for it during the school day. Therefore, it is important to consider the questions and prompts that are currently being utilized by teachers and how these discussions are or are not adding to students' understanding of what they read.

Teaching Reading Comprehension Strategies

In order to effectively teach students to comprehend texts independently and accurately, teachers must teach, model, and reinforce the use of various reading comprehension strategies. Some such strategies include predicting, setting a purpose for reading, activating prior knowledge, visualizing, inferencing, and making connections (Duke et al., 2011). These reading comprehension strategies are also supported by literacy standards for 3rd grade. The Iowa Core Literacy Standards require that students use a variety of comprehension strategies, including "making connections, determining importance, questioning, visualizing, making inferences,

summarizing, and monitoring for comprehension," (Iowa State Board of Education, 2010). Duke et al. (2011) recommended using a gradual release of responsibility model when teaching reading comprehension strategies, in which responsibility for using the strategy gradually transfers from the teacher to the student. This model involves the teacher giving "an explicit description of the strategy and when and how it should be used" (Duke et al., 2011, p. 64). Modeling makes the meaning and purpose of the strategy transparent for students. After the teacher has modeled, students and the teacher model collaboratively. Finally, students are ready to use the strategy on their own (Duke, et al, 2011).

In addition to modeling how to use particular reading comprehension strategies, it can be useful for teachers to describe when and how students should apply a particular strategy. According to Kostons and Van Der Werf (2015), "Metacognitive knowledge comprises knowledge on how, when, and why to use learning strategies" (p. 266). Supporting students in gaining this type of understanding increases the likelihood that students will use that knowledge to decide when and how to implement particular strategies as they work to comprehend the text they are reading.

One effective reading comprehension strategy is predicting. Making predictions about what might come next in a text or passage helps students anticipate what new knowledge or information they may gain and can provide authentic purpose and motivation for continued reading (Nolan, 1991). Indeed, prediction helps to "provide background information and lay the groundwork for new knowledge" and hence creates "student-generated purposes for reading" (Wood & Robinson, 1983, p. 394). Therefore, asking students to predict what they may be reading about or what might come next can help to set students up for successful comprehension.

Setting a specific purpose for reading is another important reading comprehension strategy. Research showed that students' purpose for reading a particular text "influences readers' cognitive processing of texts in terms of time spent reading and strategies employed, which in turn influences the amount of text information recalled" (Linderholm, 2006, p. 70). Initially, the teacher sets this purpose, but eventually students should be able to set their own purposes for reading in order to aid their comprehension (Blanton, Wood, & Moorman, 1990).

Another strategy that helps to support students' reading comprehension is prior knowledge activation. Because "new information is better integrated with existing information" helping students bring to mind prior knowledge can "have a strong positive impact on learning" (Kostons & Van Der Werf, 2015, p. 265). Helping students relate new information from texts they are reading to knowledge that they already have helps them to organize information in meaningful ways. Visualization is another strategy that can support reading comprehension. Indeed, De Koning and Van der Schoot (2013) stated "a central factor in differentiating proficient from less proficient readers appears to be their ability to actually visualize text content themselves" (p. 263). Prompting and directing students to visualize certain aspects of the text they are reading can support them as they work to make meaning of the text.

The ability to make inferences also aids in students' reading comprehension. "Inferencing is the term used to refer to the situation in which a reader goes beyond information that is directly provided in a text to fill in information needed to understand the text" (Kleeck, 2008, p. 628). Students who have difficulty making inferences often have difficulty with comprehension as well (Kleeck, 2008). Therefore, it is important for teachers to assist students in making inferences based on texts they are reading. Students need to be prompted to go beyond the text and to draw conclusions from what they have read.

Finally, prompting students to make connections to what they read can support their reading comprehension. "Readers bring to every reading situation not only information from prior experiences but also information from past texts. Using information from both sources, readers form mental models of single texts currently being processed" (Lenski, 1998, p. 74). By asking students questions that bring to mind prior experiences and other texts that have been read, teachers can help broaden students' understanding and improve their comprehension (Lenski, 1998). All of the above reading comprehension strategies can be supported and encouraged by teachers through the prompts that they give to students and the discussion that they engage in together.

Aside from considering the types of reading comprehension strategies that best support students in understanding what they read, it is important for teachers to consider how they are introducing, teaching, and supporting students' use of these strategies. One important consideration for teachers is the type of language that they are using to talk about these strategies with students and how to refer to these strategies when engaging in dialogue about texts.

Academic Language

When teaching, modeling, and practicing reading comprehension strategies, it is useful for teachers to use the academic language of the strategy. Academic language refers to "word knowledge that makes it possible for students to engage with, produce, and talk about texts that are valued in school" (Flynt & Brozo, 2008, p. 500). Academic language proficiency has a noticeable effect on students' reading comprehension and content-area achievement (Uccelli, Galloway, Kim, & Barr, 2010). In fact, Nagy, Townsend, Lesaux, and Schmitt (2012) stated that students who lack academic vocabulary knowledge often struggle in school. Academic language

helps students to label and understand "abstract, technical ideas" that would be difficult to describe or think about without that label (Nagy, et al., 2012, p. 93). Therefore, instruction in academic language and use of those terms helps facilitate students' thinking about skills, strategies, and processes in various content areas. Academic language is one aspect in reading comprehension that teachers can exert a high level of control over. In fact, "student's academic language proficiency is being increasingly understood in the field as a malleable factor that can be effectively scaffolded through high-quality instruction" (Uccelli, et al, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, using academic language to discuss comprehension strategies and expecting students to do so as well can lead to improvement in students' reading comprehension skills.

Methodology

Overview and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the impact of teacher prompting and questioning on students' comprehension of texts. The primary focus of this study was to examine how verbal interactions between teachers and students are used to support students' understanding of written texts. A third grade teacher, Mrs. G. was observed in order to discern patterns in how this teacher used verbal prompts and questions to assist her students in understanding what they read. The research methods are outlined in detail in the following sections: setting and participants, research design, data collection, and data analysis. IRB approved protocols were followed throughout the study.

Setting and Participants

This qualitative research study involved a single-subject case study (Merriam, 1985) of a third grade teacher at an elementary school in a midsized city in the Midwestern United States. Several recruitment tactics were used including mailed letter invitations as well as private email messages. These recruitment materials were sent to all third grade teachers at the focus elementary school. Third grade was selected as the optimal grade level because of the increased demand on third grade students to read and comprehend at an appropriate level due to mandatory retention legislation (Iowa Department of Education) and the increased volume of reading that students encounter during and after third grade. Mrs. G. responded to the recruitment materials, provided her written consent, and was selected to be the participant for this study. Mrs. G. received her undergraduate degree as a non-traditional student in elementary education from a comprehensive 4-year institution with a focus on teacher education and also earned minor in literacy education. At the time of this study, Mrs. G. had been teaching for four years. She taught sixth grade for one year, and had been teaching third grade for three years. The study was conducted on location at the elementary school where Mrs. G. teaches.

Research Design

This study was designed as a single-subject case study. A case study is an approach to research that "facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). In this study, Mrs. G's use of verbal prompting and questioning as an aid to student comprehension was explored through the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources including semi-structured interviews, video recording, and direct observations of the participant. These multiple data sources were used to enhance data credibility

(Baxter & Jack, 2008). The design of this study as a case study allowed the researcher to "deepen understanding of specific practices" used by Mrs. G. (Miles, 2015, p. 313). The aim of this case study was to gain as much information as possible about Mrs. G's approach to teaching and supporting reading comprehension through verbal interactions with her students. The qualitative nature of this study and its design as a single-subject case study allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of this teacher's approach to supporting reading comprehension.

In order to ensure data quality and valid findings, data were triangulated and reviewed by multiple sources (Miles, 2015). Interviews and observations were all recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then analyzed and coded by the primary researcher. A colleague then analyzed the data using the same coding system in order to establish and confirm stable codes. Transcribed interactions and codes were then reviewed together to triangulate the observation notes, initial interviews, and video footage. This triangulation of data sources "enhances data quality based on the principles of idea convergence and the confirmation of findings" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556). Indeed, Snyder (2012) states that triangulation, using multiple types and sources of data, "enhances the validity of the findings" (p. 4).

Data Collection

Data were collected in three phases. The first phase consisted of an initial interview with Mrs. G. to determine how she perceives her own use of prompting and questioning and how she intends these types of verbal interactions to assist students in understanding their reading. This interview was semi-structured, meaning words can be changed or questions followed up upon as long as the meaning of the questions is maintained (Denzin, 1989). In this case, guiding questions were determined ahead of time, but the researcher maintained the flexibility to

elaborate or clarify responses throughout the interview. This interview lasted 20 minutes. It was audio recorded and later transcribed. See Appendix A for the Pre-Interview Protocol containing the questions posed to Mrs. G.

The second phase of data collection consisted of two direct observations of Mrs. G. during literacy instructional time. The first observation occurred on February 9, 2016, and lasted 60 minutes. The second observation occurred on February 25, 2016, and lasted 45 minutes. During each of these observations, Mrs. G. instructed both the entire class and small groups of students, with an emphasis on reading comprehension. Anecdotal notes regarding teacher-provided prompts and questions as well as students' responses were recorded during each observational period. Both observations were video recorded and later transcribed.

The third and final stage of data collection consisted of a culminating interview with Mrs. G. Video clips from the observational footage were selected by the researcher and shown to Mrs. G. during this interview. Mrs. G. was then asked to reflect on the video clip and explain what she was doing in the clip to support her students in reading comprehension and the intended purpose of these prompts, questions, and verbal interactions. This allowed for a degree of member checking in that the primary researcher's themes and interpretations had an opportunity to be confirmed by the participant (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This interview was audio recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Analysis was ongoing throughout the study, and initial observations shaped interview questions for the final interview. After the data collection was complete, transcripts from the initial interview, observational periods, and culminating interview were reviewed along with

anecdotal notes from the observational periods. Patterns and themes were drawn out from these three sources and two major themes emerged. Each transcript was reviewed and an open-ended coding system was used to analyze the data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Dialogue showing evidence of one of these two major themes were highlighted and grouped. Evidence illustrating category 1 was highlighted in one color and evidence illustrating category 2 was highlighted in a different color. After the primary researcher completed the coding of the transcripts, a colleague reviewed the same transcripts and completed the coding using the same process as used by the primary researcher. Areas of divergence were discussed and clarified in order to ensure stable codes. Once codes were established and confirmed, data was further analyzed and evidence from each major theme was studied in order to draw out findings and determine implications for educators.

Findings

The coding and analysis of the data from the interviews and observations revealed two main themes in Mrs. G's dialogue with students related to reading comprehension. First, Mrs. G. used academic language and vocabulary to label and describe reading comprehension strategies and processes. Secondly, Mrs. G. modeled the use of reading comprehension strategies through thinking aloud, or verbalizing her own thought processes for students. Each of these main themes will be discussed in further detail in the following sections, along with examples from the interviews and observational data.

Interviews

During the two interviews that were conducted before and after the observational periods, Mrs. G. discussed her approach to reading comprehension instruction. She described aspects of her instructional practice that she finds to be important to supporting students' understanding of texts that they read. During the pre-interview, Mrs. G. described how she views her role as a reading educator: "I think part of my job is to engage them [the students] and get them excited about reading….just feeding them enough information to get them excited about reading, I think that's a big part of my job. And giving them purpose." Mrs. G. shared that her role is to facilitate, support, and encourage students to read for understanding and to enjoy reading. She also mentioned the importance of "giving students strategies to help them digest what they're reading and comprehend what they're reading."

Mrs. G. also referred to the importance of modeling throughout both interviews, stating that she finds modeling to be very helpful for her students: "I think when they [students] can kind of see your thinking...I think that is helpful." During the culminating interview, Mrs. G. stated that she uses modeling "all of the time…I use it with math, with social studies, I use it with everything." She shared that she is always thinking about where she can model certain skills for students and share her thought process with them. Mrs. G. noted that modeling is especially important for her students who are struggling with reading comprehension. She stated that she tries to model her own thinking so that students have a grasp of how to apply strategies and think about what they are reading. Finally, Mrs. G. discussed "having them [the students] talk about what their thoughts are and share and express their thoughts" She talked about how she tries to model her own thinking for students when needed, but to turn that responsibility over to her

students when they are ready and having students model their own thinking for each other as well.

Use of Academic Language

   While instructing students in the area of reading comprehension, Mrs. G. used academic language and vocabulary to label and describe specific strategies and processes that she wanted the students to engage in. Examples of this type of teacher dialogue, such as *purpose, text features, connections, inferencing,* and *prior knowledge* were found in the transcripts from the observations conducted. In addition, several examples of students using academic language to label a specific strategy or skill were found.

   Giving Directions. Several examples of academic language were found when Mrs. G. was giving directions or explaining a task to students. For example, when giving directions to students for a nonfiction reading task, Mrs. G. said, "Now today I have a task for you to do, so it's going to be important that you pay attention...now your purpose for this is I want you to look at your text features, what's the title?" (Observation video, 2/9). Mrs. G. used the word *purpose* to communicate to students that she was going to give them information about why they were reading and what they would be looking for. She then used the phrase *text features* to describe components of the text that students would be focusing on, including the title and table of contents.

   In another instance, before reading a book aloud to students, Mrs. G. said, "Now, I kinda want you to think about what I just told you about World War II and I want you to see if you can make any connections with this book...you're going to have to use your inferencing skills

because there are no words" (Observation video, 2/25). In this case, Mrs. G. used academic language to describe to students what they should be looking for and what skills to engage in while listening to a text read aloud. Mrs. G. used the phrases *making connections* and *inferencing skills* to label the specific skills and strategies she wanted students to implement during this task.

In another example, Mrs. G. was discussing a book about Amelia Earhart and said, "We're going to activate kind of our prior knowledge about flying and what we know about flying" (Observation video, 2/9). In this case, Mrs. G. used the phrase *activate prior knowledge* to communicate to students that they needed to think about what they already knew about the topic. In this case, Mrs. G. follows the academic language up with a description using common language (*what we know about flying*). In this way, students were exposed to the academic term for this skill, while also ensuring understanding as to what the skill entails.

Responding to students. Mrs. G. also used academic language to respond to and elaborate on students' comments and discussion about texts. For example, when discussing biographies, one student said, "This is kind of what happened to my girl, Jane Goodall, when she was little…" Mrs. G. responded by saying, "That's such a good connection...text-to-text" (Observation video, 2/9). In this way, Mrs. G. was acknowledging and confirming the validity of this student's contribution, but also labeling a skill the student had demonstrated with its academic term, *text-to-text connection*.

Another example of this was found when one student said, "She felt the sweet breeze of the wind" and Mrs. G. replied, "Beautiful descriptive!" (Observation video, 2/9). Once again, Mrs. G. was praising the student's contribution to the discussion, while also labeling the academic term corresponding to the student's comment, *descriptive*. In addition, Mrs. G.

responded to a student's comment about what how particular characters in a text were feeling ("I think the mice are scared") by saying, "I like your thinking. I like how you're using your inferences" (Observation video, 2/25). This comment also illustrates Mrs. G's ability to praise students, while also labeling the skill the student was demonstrating.

Student use of academic language. Examples of students using academic language to discuss texts were also found in the observations. Students made comments including, "I have a connection," "We kind of predicted what was going to happen," and, "I'm inferring that…" These comments reveal that Mrs. G's students sometimes incorporate the academic language modeled by Mrs. G. into their own dialogue about texts they are reading.

Modeling and Thinking Aloud

Another theme that emerged from analysis of Mrs. G's dialogue with students was her use of modeling, or a thinking aloud process, to demonstrate and describe certain reading comprehension skills and strategies. Mrs. G. described this strategy in the pre-interview: "I think, what works best, for me anyway, is just to model that thinking process and model those strategies...I think when they [students] can kind of see your thinking...I think that is helpful. I think the more modeling you can do for them, the better," (Interview, 2/4). Through this thinking aloud process, Mrs. G. made her own thought processes visible to students. Rather than simply stating what students should do while reading, Mrs. G. described what she does while reading and talked through certain strategies with students.

Verbalizing teacher thought processes. One way in which Mrs. G. used modeling and thinking aloud is by verbalizing her own thoughts and ideas. For example, before reading a passage about Amelia Earhart aloud to students, Mrs. G. modeled her thinking, saying:

> She was famous for flying airplanes, I know that. I'm kind of checking what I already know about her. And I know Amelia Earhart's plane crashed...and I think to myself, 'I don't know if I remember where her plane crashed. I think it was somewhere tropical...so I'm wondering if it has anything in the story about that. But you know what else I'm wondering? I'm wondering how she even got interested or excited about flying in the first place. (Observation video, 2/9).

In this example, Mrs. G. tells students what she is doing ("I'm kind of checking what I already know") and then proceeds to talk through how she would accomplish that task, verbalizing her thinking for students.

Mrs. G. demonstrated this technique again while sharing a wordless picture book with students. She said, "You know what I'm wondering? I'm thinking to myself, 'Those mice look like they're up to something. I think they're setting a trap,' is what I'm inferring," (Observation video, 2/25). Once again, Mrs. G. verbalized her own thoughts and ideas and told students her reactions to what she had read and her purpose for continuing to read.

Rephrasing and repeating student thought processes. Mrs. G. also used modeling and thinking aloud to rephrase student thought processes in response to student comments and contributions to discussion. For example, during a discussion about an Amelia Earhart text, a student said, "I think she was like, like with Neil Armstrong, and she just was always fascinated by flying." In response, Mrs. G. said,

So you're making another connection to your person, Neil Armstrong, right?...And

maybe they had the same experience in childhood so if you were reading this, you would

say, 'Oh I wonder if she had kind of the same experience as Neil Armstrong.' Ooo I like

that." (Observation video, 2/9).

In this example, Mrs. G. confirmed what the student was trying to share ("You're making

another connection...right?"), but then elaborated on this and verbalized her own thought

process. She shared what she would be thinking to herself as she reads if this was an idea she

was curious about.

Another example of Mrs. G. rephrasing student thought processes was found when Mrs.

G. was sharing a wordless picture book with the class and the students were discussing what the

characters might do. One student said, "I think he would be like kind of proactive. Maybe he

could say, like, 'Can I have my flower back?'" Mrs. G. responded, "Yeah, say um 'It, would it

be ok, you took my flower from me. May I have my flower back, please?' Or or I you know or 'I

could pick one for you, but I would like my flower back. I can help you find your own flower'"

(Observation video, 2/25). In this example, Mrs. G. once again confirmed what the student had

contributed to the discussion and then elaborated by rephrasing what the student had said and

thinking aloud about what the character might be thinking or saying at that particular point in the

story.

During both observational periods, Mrs. G. demonstrated use of two methods for

supporting students in understanding what they read: the use of academic language and the use

of modeling through thinking aloud. These practices are supported by research and also support

students' acquisition of several Common Core State Standards for 3rd grade literacy (See

Appendix B). For this reason, educators should consider the use of these two practices as a way in which to support their students' reading comprehension.

Discussion

This single-subject case study provides a lens through which educators can examine their own use of prompting and questioning as it relates to student reading comprehension. Each of the two themes that emerged from this study: the use of academic language and the use of modeling and thinking aloud will be discussed further and connected to the research and Common Core State Standards in the sections that follow.

Use of Academic Language

The Common Core Literacy Standards for 3rd grade (Appendix B) include the expectation that students will "acquire and use general academic and domain-specific words and phrases," (National Governors Association, 2010). In addition, the Iowa Core Literacy Standards for 3rd grade require that students use a variety of comprehension strategies, including "making connections, determining importance, questioning, visualizing, making inferences, summarizing, and monitoring for comprehension," (Iowa State Board of Education, 2010). Through her use of academic language, Mrs. G. helped support students in working towards both of these standards; she used academic and domain-specific language to label and discuss the various reading comprehension strategies supported by the Iowa Core.

In the examples given in the Findings section, Mrs. G. used words and phrases such as "make a connection," "use your inferencing skills," and "activating prior knowledge" when prompting and questioning students during discussion. In this way, she exposed students to

academic language while prompting them to implement the reading comprehension strategies

they had been taught. In addition to lending support to students' acquisition of academic

standards, the use of academic language during instruction has a positive effect on students'

reading comprehension and content-area achievement (Uccelli et al., 2010). As illustrated in this

case study, teachers' use of academic language to label reading comprehension skills and

strategies they are referencing can lead students to use this same language when discussing their

own thoughts, ideas, and processes. This creates a common language with which to speak about

processes that students are engaging in while trying to make sense of texts they are reading. This

in turn can help improve students' ability to think about, evaluate, and analyze texts they are

reading (Beck & McKeowen, 1981).

Modeling and Thinking Aloud

In addition to her use of academic language to label strategies she is discussing with

students, Mrs. G. demonstrated modeling of reading comprehension strategies and processes

through thinking aloud. The Iowa Core Literacy Standards for 3rd grade expect that students will

be able use a variety of comprehension strategies, including "making connections, determining

importance, questioning, visualizing, making inferences, summarizing, and monitoring for

comprehension," (Iowa State Board of Education, 2010) independently while reading. However,

before students can be expected to implement these strategies independently, teachers must give

"an explicit description of the strategy and when and how it should be used," (Duke et al., 2011,

p. 64). In addition, the teacher should model the use of the strategy and practice collaboratively

with students (Duke et al., 2011). Mrs. G's case illustrates how teachers can think through their

thought process aloud with students in order to clearly demonstrate how to effectively implement

a given reading comprehension strategy or skill, such as setting a purpose or making inferences.

Prompting students by reminding them of when, how, or why to use a particular strategy helps bring to mind students' prior "metacognitive knowledge," (Kostons & Van Der Werf, 2015, p. 266) which sets students' up for success in using those strategies to improve their reading comprehension. In the examples provided, Mrs. G. used thinking aloud to model for students how to use a strategy. By stopping at certain points in the text to model and discuss the use of certain thought processes and strategies, she also helped students distinguish when it would be appropriate for them to employ those strategies.

Recommendations for Further Research

While this case study provides examples of a few practices that can be effective in supporting and improving students' reading comprehension skills, it did focus on only one teacher in one particular context. Student dialogue and observation appear to confirm that they comprehend what they read or used a particular strategy but additional assessment data would support those observations. Educators should consider the context in which they teach and their particular students when determining how to most effectively support their students in understanding what they read. While this case study provides useful examples of techniques used to support comprehension, it is illustrative of one teacher's practice. For further research, it would be valuable to compare multiple teachers' practices in order to establish patterns in methods used by teachers to support reading comprehension.

In addition, limited observational periods were conducted, which limited the amount of data collected and analyzed. Two one-hour sessions of literacy instruction were observed. While the patterns and themes discussed in this paper do emerge in both of the observational periods, this is a representative portion of Mrs. G's literacy instruction for these students. For further

research, it would be useful to gather more data from additional observational periods in order to confirm that the patterns and themes established are maintained. Although this study involved limited observational periods, Mrs. G. did discuss both themes in the interviews conducted, as she talked about "giving students strategies to help them digest what they're reading and comprehend what they're reading" and "modeling the thinking process" for students. Therefore, conclusions can be drawn about Mrs. G's classroom practice and techniques that educators can use to support their students' reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The focus of this qualitative research project was to describe the impact of teacher questioning and prompting on students' comprehension of texts. The researcher observed a third grade teacher at a local elementary school in order to discern patterns in how this teacher used verbal prompts and questions to assist her students in understanding what they read. Interviews with the teacher were conducted and observational data were collected in an effort to discern patterns in this teacher's use of prompting and questioning as it relates to reading comprehension. From analysis of the data, two main themes were established: (1) the use of academic language, and (2) the use of teacher modeling through thinking aloud. Examples of Mrs. G's use of these two methods of supporting students' reading comprehension were found across data sets.

This study is illustrative of one particular teacher's practice and insights can be gleaned about ways in which educators can begin to support students' improved understanding of texts being read. Educators can use academic language to label and discuss various reading comprehension strategies, including predicting, activating prior knowledge, making connections,

setting purpose for reading, and making inferences. By doing so, educators are supporting students in not only the effective use of reading comprehension strategies, but also in acquiring and using academic and domain-specific language, both of which are expectations required by the 3rd grade Common Core standards for literacy. Academic language can be used both when giving directions and when responding to or rephrasing student comments. Through consistent teacher use of academic language, students may start using this same academic language when discussing their own thoughts and ideas.

In addition, educators can model reading comprehension strategies by thinking aloud. They can do so both by verbalizing their own thought processes and by rephrasing or repeating student thought processes. In doing so, internal comprehension processes are made explicit and students gain metacognitive knowledge of when and how to implement particular strategies to aid in their understanding of texts. Given increased pressure on students to develop reading comprehension skills because of mandatory retention legislation, it is important that teachers consider how they can best support students in acquiring these comprehension skills and strategies. By implementing the two practices described in this study, educators can begin to support students in their efforts to improve their reading comprehension.

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APPENDIX A

Pre-Interview Protocol

1. Describe your teaching experience (undergraduate education, teaching jobs).

2. How do you typically assess students' reading comprehension?

3. What are some ways in which you check on students' understanding as they are reading?

4. How do you gather information related to students' thoughts about texts that they read?

5. What resources have you read or been offered that help you check for student understanding?

6. What are some things you have tried that didn't work well?

7. How would you describe your role in discussion with students?

8. What discussion structures or formats do your students participate in? How do you support the students in these different formats?

   a. What types of prompts, questions, and support do you provide in a one-on-one reading conference with an individual student?

   b. What types of prompts, questions, and support do you provide in a small group setting such as a guided reading group?

   c. What types of prompts, questions, and support do you provide during whole class literacy instruction?

Common Core State Standards: 3rd Grade Literacy

Reading: Literature

Key Ideas and Details:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.1
Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.2
Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3
Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

Craft and Structure:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.4
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral language.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.5
Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.6
Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.7
Explain how specific aspects of a text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.8
(RL.3.8 not applicable to literature)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.9
Compare and contrast the themes, settings, and plots of stories written by the same author about the same or similar characters (e.g., in books from a series)

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, at the high end of the grades 2-3 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Speaking and Listening

Comprehension and Collaboration:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 3 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Iowa Core State Standards: 3rd Grade Literacy

Reading Standards for Literature

Key Ideas and Details:

RL.3.IA.1

Employ the full range of research-based comprehension strategies, including making connections, determining importance, questioning, visualizing, making inferences, summarizing, and monitoring for comprehension.