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# Talking for meaning: The dialogic engagement of teachers and children in a small group reading context



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports a UK study which investigated the instruction of comprehension strategies for elementary children in small group discussions about short animated films. The qualitative analysis of three lessons is reported to illustrate the differing approaches taken by the teachers, showing how they initiate discussions and follow up responses from the children. We examine how children's ideas are elicited, selected for further discussion, developed and evaluated by the teachers. Findings highlight operating principles for how teachers conceptualise and realise reading comprehension instruction and how these relate to the use of key language, focusing on whether this produces a 'performance' of dialogue or genuine dialogic engagement.

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## 1. Introduction

The research reported in this paper set out to investigate the effect of using small-group discussions about short, animated films to teach reading comprehension. The quantitative results of this pilot study in terms of outcome have been reported elsewhere (Maine & Shields, 2015) showing that there was a significant increase in children's comprehension as measured in a standardised test. The project was a ten-week programme where six teachers worked with small groups of Key Stage 2 children (7–11 year olds), using films as a non-written text source for teaching narrative comprehension strategies (Maine, 2015b). In the project, teachers modelled specific Talk Prompts that aimed to enable the children's high-level comprehension, reasoning and creative thinking (Anderson et al., 2001; Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999; Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009; Soter et al., 2008).

The focus of this case study is to explore the project sessions in depth, as whilst the quantitative data indicates improvement, they do not illustrate what was actually happening in the sessions. They do not show, for example, the fidelity of implementation and the epistemic status of the language that the teachers used, nor the uptake of the language by the children and whether in fact this resulted in what Murphy and colleagues (2009, p. 741) define as 'high-level comprehension', that is, 'critical and reflective thinking about the text'. In this paper, data from three lessons in the programme are analysed close-up, focusing on the language of inference, reasoning and creative thinking, and how this indicated the teaching and learning that was happening. The lessons were led by different teachers yet focused on the same filmic text, particular strategies for comprehension and related language. In addition to mapping the use of the key language highlighted by the programme, particular attention is paid to the language exchanges, patterns of turns and chains of interaction and thinking (Bloomer, Power Carter, Morton Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Maine, 2015a; Nystrand, 2006;

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Wells, 1999; Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006) and how they illuminate the discourse dynamic of these dialogic, reading discussions and evidence high-level comprehension.

## 2. The socio-cultural activity of reading comprehension instruction

This is a socio-cultural study, highlighting the situatedness of reading events (Rosenblatt, 1994), and recognising therefore, that different readers will bring different interpretations to bear when they talk together to make meaning from text (Maine, 2015a). Central to a socio-cultural perspective on reading and reading comprehension instruction is the importance of multiple potential interpretations, with readers, activity and text all impacting on meanings that are made (Snow, 2002). Where multiple readers are involved together, then meanings are negotiated and shared (Maine, 2013) with readers accountable to each other in the justification of their interpretations, which are in turn accountable to the text. Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory which emphasises the situatedness of each new reading fits well into a socio-cultural paradigm, and for Damico, Campano and Harste (2009, p. 175) 'a proliferation of meanings, rather than single or fixed meanings, could become a standard approach to literacy interpretation or textual response'. This is important as it places emphasis on the process of reading comprehension as hypothesising meaning-making rather than the product of correct answers (Aukerman, 2013). Hassett (2010) too, highlights the importance of multiple readings, particularly in relation to visual texts, arguing for a multi-perspective approach. Mercer and Howe (2012, p. 13) emphasise 'the relationship between social activity and individual thinking [as] a vital, distinctive characteristic of human cognition', which takes the argument further. Not only should we pursue multiple accountable interpretations, but the collaboration of creating meanings and connections (Bloome et al., 2005) together, is essential to the development of thinking. As Duffy, Miller, Howerton, Baxter Williams (2010, p. 61) argue, 'in sum, socio-cultural and situative influences have caused us to think about comprehension not only in terms of a text and reader interaction, but also in term of how the social context influences the meaning to be generated'.

Of course, in a reading instruction event, the socio-cultural context also includes the teachers themselves, who additionally bring individual knowledge and experience, but also teaching orientations that are based on their values and underpinning beliefs. Aukerman (2013) argues that the approaches that teachers take to engaging the children in discussions about text are therefore influenced by their 'pedagogical orientations' (A2). In line with this argument, our study highlights how teachers' language can be seen as an indicator of the goals and values which implicitly inform their conceptualisation and realisation of reading comprehension instruction. Importantly it illuminates how these may influence the children's comprehension strategy building.

Recognising and respecting that different readers might bring different perspectives to the reading event favours a dialogic approach to reading discussions, where teachers enable and value alternative viewpoints. This approach leads the children to challenge and critique their own interpretation through dialogic interaction (Alexander, 2008; Nystrand, 1997) rather than seek solely 'correct' answers or 'authoritative' readings (Aukerman, 2013; Dombey, 2010; Murphy et al., 2009; Soter et al., 2008; Swain, 2010). A small group reading context offers the ideal dialogic 'situation' for reading as it allows for extended probing, elaboration and jointly constructed meanings.

## 3. A small group dialogic approach to reading instruction

There have been several recent studies concerned with the effectiveness of teaching reading comprehension in the small group context, particularly considering the teacher and student interactions that make these groupings effective for the development of high order thinking (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Murphy et al., 2009; Nystrand, 2006; Soter et al., 2008; Spörer, Brunstein, & Kieschke, 2009; Swain, 2010). Soter et al. (2008) studied nine different small group discussion approaches to teaching reading comprehension. Their study grouped the nine contexts in relation to the goals of the activity and whether these had efferent, expressive or critical-analytic stances. They found that effective discussions featured authentic or open-ended questioning and uptake (by students and teachers), structure and focus, and opportunities for extended contributions. They noted that some modelling and scaffolding was necessary on the part of the teachers to prompt 'elaborated forms of individual reasoning' (p. 389) and that discussions were most productive when 'structured and focused yet not dominated by the teacher' (ibid). By considering reading comprehension instruction as a socio-cultural event, we centralise the agency of the participants involved. Taking this view, we argue that even if the goals of a reading context appear to be set to a particular 'stance' as argued by the authors above, it is the underlying values and expectations by which teachers conceptualise the goals of the reading instruction event, that impact on the degree of control they allow students to have in shaping the discussion towards either jointly constructed, or authoritative meanings. These implicit orientations are of particular interest in this study, as we argue that they have the potential to alter the opportunities for children's engagement in authentic discussion. If children are not enabled to fully realise their own interpretations, due to the teacher's goal of prioritising an authoritative perspective, or by concentrating on the process rather than substance of thinking, their ability to transfer strategies to new contexts may be limited.

Genuine dialogic engagement, therefore, presents a challenge for teachers. On the one hand, welcoming multiple perspectives and valuing them is paramount, ensuring that children have legitimate voice that is not merely overshadowed by the teacher's supposed authoritative access to the 'right' answer. On the other hand, this might seem to suggest that all interpretations are equally valid, which may be misleading for children trying to evaluate responses. Wolf, Crosson and

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