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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

Using digital texts vs. paper texts to read together: Insights into engagement and mediation of literacy practices among linguistically diverse students



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 November 2016

Received in revised form 18 January 2017

Accepted 27 January 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Peer learning

Digital text

e-Books

Linguistically diverse learners

English language learners

Emergent bilinguals

ABSTRACT

As schools around the world increasingly use digital text, research is needed to understand the impact different media may have on opportunities for language and literacy development. Using mixed methods to analyze students' collaborative interactions across different media, this study examined how linguistically diverse students engaged with digital and paper books in a cross-age peer-learning literacy program. Findings revealed that the quality of students' engagement differed across media. Students were more likely to engage in meaningful talk, use text features to support comprehension, and attend to text when using paper books. Findings have implications for how educators may reconsider instruction using digital texts in order to support language and literacy development with students learning an additional language.

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1. Introduction

With the global spread of the internet and mobile technologies, digital text is becoming more widely used for literacy and language learning inside and outside schools; and some argue the very notion of literacy is changing from a static, singular skillset based on linear print books to a multifaceted and critical processing of complex texts consisting of symbols and visuals, accessed through technologies that change rapidly (International Reading Association, 2009; Luke, 2003). Despite the proliferation of digital media, we still know relatively little about how the use of digital texts may affect language and literacy development (Felvegi & Matthew, 2012). At the same time, schools are becoming increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse, and educators are searching for ways to best support diverse students' literacy and second/additional language learning. Our study set out to examine linguistically diverse students' collaborative interactions across different media in a cross-age peer-learning literacy program to understand the impact media type may have on engagement with text and learning opportunities.

To support language and literacy development with linguistically diverse students, research has shown that students need to hear and use spoken language in many different contexts and engage in discussions where they use language with peers and teachers for meaningful, communicative purposes (Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2012). Similarly,

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research has suggested that linguistically diverse students need opportunities for meaningful, collaborative interaction (Walqui, 2006) and active engagement in academic literacy tasks (Gersten & Baker, 2000) to develop language. Literacy focused research has shown that oral language activities in the classroom are critical for students' reading comprehension, as it helps students make important connections and clarifications around the text (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Zygoris-Coe, 2001). Given the importance of conversation around text and the potential of different media for language development, research is needed to explore how different text formats may afford or constrain students' participation in these literacy activities. There is some indication that digital texts may offer opportunities for high-quality talk about text, which is essential for linguistically diverse learners (Baker et al., 2014); but research also suggests that teachers must play a facilitative role for the benefits of digital text to be realized (see Moody, Justice, & Cabell, 2010 discussed below).

The connections between literacy learning and media type (and digital text, in particular) are far from straightforward (Peercy, Martín-Beltrán, Silverman, and Daniel, 2015). Research has documented students using digital texts on computers and tablets for varied purposes such as practicing beginning literacy skills, accessing engaging content with interactive features and hypertext, researching various topics online, learning vocabulary, and enhancing productivity and creativity (Dunn, Gray, Moffett, & Mitchell, 2016; Felvegi & Matthew, 2012; Meskill, Anthony, Hilliker-Vanstrander, Tseng, & You, 2006). Using digital texts in literacy and language learning has been shown to benefit students in many ways, including helping to engage reluctant readers and readers with diverse learning needs, increasing students' motivation and self-efficacy in reading, and connecting with students' out-of-school multimodal, hybrid literacy practices (Goodwyn, 2014; Li, Pow, Wong, & Fung, 2010; Moody et al., 2010; Ware & Warschauer, 2005). However, it is clear that reading in this new medium places unique demands on the reader, such as the need to stay focused and navigate digital text effectively (Cardullo, Zygoris-Coe, Wilson, Craanen, & Stafford, 2012), and interactive features in many e-books may distract rather than support readers (Schugar, Smith, & Schugar, 2013).

More research is needed to understand students' face-to-face interactions around digital text (Baker, 2001; Davis & Neitzel, 2012). Studies examining the use of digital texts for student collaboration and writing have suggested that digital text on tablets and computers facilitate collaboration by allowing students to share screens and construct documents together in real time (Hutchison, Beschorner, & Schmidt-Crawford, 2012). Research has also found that digital technologies can facilitate collaborative reading by allowing students to assess each other's reading fluency, answer comprehension questions together, and co-construct reading responses (Lan, Sung, & Chang, 2009), as well as by promoting behaviors such as monitoring word recognition and summarizing text together (Davis & Neitzel, 2012). However, few studies have examined the quality of student collaboration and the depth of their engagement with digital text compared to traditional, paper-based text. More research is needed to examine students' face-to-face interaction around digital text (Baker, 2001), how reading comprehension may differ when students read digital versus traditional paper texts (Leu, Mallette, & Karchmer, 2001; Mangen, Walgermo, & Brønnick, 2013), and how students' engagement may differ with digital texts (Burnett, 2010).

Student engagement has been shown to have critical importance for children's reading comprehension (Wigfield et al., 2008). While there is large body of research that has investigated children's engagement behaviors with traditional text, research examining children's engagement with digital text is scant. The work of Moody et al. (2010) is one of the few studies to examine children's reading engagement in varying media, with a focus on understanding the way electronic storybooks affect young children's shared reading experiences. They focused on adult-led e-storybook (digital text) reading, child-led e-storybook reading, and adult-led traditional (paper) storybook reading and found that children exhibited the greatest levels of persistence (indicating engagement) with adult-led e-storybook readings, even though they produced more communicative initiations during the adult-led traditional storybook readings. Understanding how and why engagement with digital text may differ from engagement with traditional paper texts warrants further research.

This study begins to address the gaps in the research concerning engagement across different media among linguistically diverse students. By observing students' collaborative interactions across different media, our study provides a window into students' dialogic engagement and literacy processes in the moment-to-moment interactions with texts and peers. We examined student interactions as they read together in an elementary school cross-age peer learning (CAPL) program, Reading Buddies, designed for linguistically diverse learners. Our study was guided by the following **research questions**: How do linguistically diverse students use digital text (on tablets) and traditional paper text (in books) to mediate language and literacy learning during cross-age peer interactions? How does student engagement compare across text types? What kinds of opportunities and challenges for language and literacy development do different text formats afford?

2. Conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework is grounded in sociocultural theory and draws upon previous research that examined student interaction and engagement with literacy practices. Our focus on student interactions around text types is oriented by sociocultural theory, which conceptualizes learning as socially situated and mediated by cultural tools (Cole & Wertsch, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Our analysis of students' talk around digital and traditional texts draws from sociocultural discourse analysis, which aims to understand "how spoken language is used as a tool for thinking collectively . . . to study how people pursue joint educational activities" (Mercer, 2005, p. 138). Drawing from Mercer (2005) and Mercer and Howe (2012) we conceptualize classroom talk as a social mode of thinking, in which teachers and students use language for "constructing knowledge, creating joint understanding and tackling problems collaboratively" (Mercer, 2005, p. 137).

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