

The Effects of Reading Strategies on Students' Reading Levels

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of small reading groups, independent reading, and partner reading on students' reading levels from on grade level to above grade level. The participants of this study were five third grade students enrolled at an elementary school in Baltimore County. The treatment students were provided instruction from Baltimore County Public School English Language Arts curriculum as designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. In addition to this curriculum, treatment students received small group instruction, were required to complete forty-five minutes of daily independent reading, and partner reading during independent work. The null hypothesis was supported based on the pre- and post-test data, which revealed slight, but non-significant reading level growth. Future research should continue in this area to determine methods of instructions to promote reading level growth to more complex text.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The following study was inspired by the implementation of the English and Language Arts Common Core State Standards. These standards require the use of instructional texts with an increase in text complexity. Students need to be able to tackle these more complex and rigorous texts, demonstrating their fluency and comprehension with clarity.

As a third grade teacher, the researcher has provided extra support and remediation for below grade level readers and enrichment for above grade level readers. The complacency and oversight of on grade level readers in conjunction with the drive towards text complexity lead to the topic of study and candidates for research. Students need to be exposed richer, more complex text in order to become more globally competitive students and therefore more globally competitive citizens. As students grapple with these more complex texts, they are able to implement comprehensive reading strategies and increase their reading level growth.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of small reading groups, independent reading, and partner reading on students' reading levels from on grade level to above grade level.

Hypothesis

While research suggests that specific reading strategies and activities can have an impact on the reading growth of students, due to the shorter time frame of implementation, it is hypothesized that implementation of reading strategies and activities will have no effect on students' reading level growth from on grade level to above grade level.

Operational Definitions

Reading growth, as referenced in this research, is defined as the growth of a student's Lexile range over a period of time. The Lexile range for a student is determined by their score on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment. The MAP assessment is discussed in greater detail in the following section, and will be used as the instrument in this study.

Reading activities and strategies can be defined as small group instruction, independent reading, and paired reading. Small group instruction consists of a teacher instructing 5-6 students, providing more individual support than whole group instruction. Independent reading involves students reading self-selected texts for 15-30 minutes both in school and at home. Paired reading takes place when an above grade level reader and an on grade level or below grade level reader are paired together to read the same text. The above grade level reader is the coach and the partner reads along.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A major focus of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts is the increasing of text complexity. The goal is for students to increase their abilities in order to read more complex text over their school careers as well increasing reading comprehension across the elementary grades. Third and fifth graders are expected to independently read and comprehend grade-level texts by the end of the school year (Stahl, 2012). The complexities of these grade-level texts are determined by Lexile measurements. These measurements are also used determine a student's instructional reading level.

Defining Reading Comprehension and the Comprehensive Reader

The definition of reading comprehension has developed and shifted in importance over several years. Comprehension was once thought of as unimportant, but in the 19th century the relationship between meaning and comprehending began to develop. A shift in the importance of reading comprehension came in the early 20th century, when educators began to emphasize the importance improving comprehension during silent reading as opposed to an emphasis on oral reading. This gave students an “internal control” with which they could create their own meaning and connections with a text (“Comprehension,” 2011).

Reading comprehension, as maintained by researchers, is dependent on a combination of four components. These components include reader characteristics, teacher characteristics, text characteristics, and the educational context. The comprehension of a reader depends on age, ability, affect, knowledge bases, and motivation. A teacher's knowledge, experience, attitude and pedagogical approach also have a great impact on the comprehension of a reader. The genre,

format, and features of the text of choice as well the educational environment, task, social grouping and purpose of the reading all of great importance for reading comprehension.

Experienced comprehensive readers actively build meaning as they read. This is a subconscious process that occurs naturally along with questioning in order to monitor understanding while reading as well as rereading and reviewing text in order to comprehend. The readers are self-motivated and enjoy reading because they know they create their own meaning from the text in connection with their schema and perspectives.

Comprehensive readers apply a set of metacognitive processes each time they are exposed to a text. Previewing of the text takes place before reading even occurs. The reader examines the title and text features in order to gather information prior to reading. This allows the reader to access prior knowledge that may assist them in making connections as well setting a purpose for reading. Throughout reading, a comprehensive reader checks their understanding, monitors their comprehension, combines new knowledge from the text with previous knowledge to construct meaning, and utilizes appropriate resources in order to provide assistance while reading. Upon completion of a text, a comprehensive reader summarizes the text, assesses information in the text as compared to schema on the topic, and applies ideas and knowledge from the text to a broader range of situations.

Text Complexity

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, (CCSS/ELA), calls for an increase in text complexity over students' school careers, but what is text complexity? Text complexity, as defined by the CCSS/ELA, is a function of qualitative factors, quantitative factors, and matching reader to text and task (Hiebert, 2011). The qualitative measures of a text include the purpose, structure, knowledge demands, and language of the text. Quantitative

measures include the text's readability or Lexile. Matching reader to text and task includes the reader characteristics, as discussed in the previous section, and the purpose of the task applied to the text. Below is a graphic of the Common Core Standards Model of Text Complexity.



Lexiles and Their Purpose

The term “lexile” has become a buzz word and one of great meaning for educators and readers in the Common Core Era. Lexile measurements are determined by a combination of syntactic, (word frequency), and semantic, (sentence length), measures (Hiebert, 2011). These measurements are numeric representations of a reader's ability or a text's difficulty. When applied, the mathematical algorithm provides a Lexile score. The Lexile framework also includes a Lexile scale. The scale provides a range for readers to stretch their reading abilities. The scales ranged from a beginning reading level at 0L, the easiest, continuing to 2000L, the most complex.

Readers' individual Lexile scores are determined by computerized reading-assessment tools. Baltimore County Public Schools implements the Measures of Academic Progress assessment, (MAP), in which students are provided their Lexile score after completing the assessment. This score indicates the level of text a student can read independently with 75% comprehension, and dictates the student's instructional reading level. This 75% comprehension rate allows the student to comprehend enough to develop meaning from the text, but also provides enough of a challenge to keep the reader engaged, but not frustrated. The goal is to

encourage reader growth by providing texts that are not too easy, but not too difficult. The individual Lexile score also determines the student's range of readability levels within the Lexile scale. The range allows the student to read 50 Lexiles above their instructional level and 100 Lexiles below (Lennon & Burdick, 2004).

CCSS/ELA promotes a “staircase” of increasing text complexity across grade levels. The table below illustrates this staircase of Lexile bands and the expectations as put in place by CCSS/ELA.	Current Lexile Band	"Stretch" Lexile Band*
Grade Band		
K-1	N/A	N/A
2-3	450L- 725L	420L- 820L
4-5	645L- 845L	740L- 1010L
6-8	860L- 1010L	925L- 1185L
9-10	960L- 1115L	1050L- 1335L
11-CCR	1070L- 1220L	1185L- 1385L

*COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH, LANGUAGE ARTS, APPENDIX A

Matching Text to Reader

Identifying a book that matches a student's instructional level is a simple task when using Lexile measurements. The third component of CCSS/ELA model of text complexity, matching text to reader, is not as easy a task. Educators must consider instructional levels, but also challenge or "stretch" levels as well as student's experience with reading, motivation, and prior knowledge. This may seem daunting to educators, especially when considering struggling readers.

The original framework for identifying a student's reading level was established by Emmett Betts. He identified four levels of text complexity including the independent level, instructional level, frustration level, and the capacity level or highest level a student could possibly comprehend (Halladay, 2012). A student's reading level was determined by identifying the highest level at which a child could read a new text with 95-98% accuracy and 75% comprehension. This thought changed as it was further analyzed who found 90% accuracy acceptable for instructional level. The reasoning for this was that a student's instructional level could be "elastic" provided some instructional supports (Stahl, 2012).

Frustration level texts were those in which word recognition was below 90% or comprehension of a given text below 50% (Halladay, 2012). This term is not used in the description of matching text to student in the CCSS/ELA Model of Text Complexity. These are now referred to as challenge or "stretch" texts that are included in the CCSS/ELA staircase. Instead of students struggling with frustration level texts, they are exposed to more challenging texts in combination with instructional level texts. Educators may use varying instructional supports in order to make these challenging texts more accessible to students who typically

struggle (Glasswell & Ford, 2010). It is important that students are not frustrated with these more difficult texts, but are engaged and motivated.

Measurements of Reading Progress

There are several assessments that may be used to measure reading progress and reading achievement is represented in different ways. Two methods used in the Baltimore County Public Schools are the Measure of Academic Progress assessment, (MAP), and the American Reading Company's 100 Book Challenge. One is computer-based assessment, while the other is a tandem in-school and at-home reading program.

The MAP assessment is computer-based test in which students answer 40-50 multiple-choice items. They are provided with an individualized assessment that is adjusted to their ability level. This is determined based on their answers. Students are provided with a RIT score as well as a Lexile score. This data is readily available and is easily displayed to compare and monitor students' Lexile growth over time. Students take the MAP assessment in the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. The MAP assessment shows a high level of reliability and is structured to align with the CCSS/ELA (Cizek, Gierl & Alves, 2012).

American Reading Company's 100 Book Challenge is a program implemented in several Baltimore County Public Schools. The program promotes 60 minutes of independent reading daily. Students are assessed through reading conferences in order to determine their ability level. Their level corresponds with a color and the color corresponds with the book bin in which the students may choose individual texts to be read both in school and at home. The goal is for each student to read 30 minutes in school and 30 minutes at home. Students keep track of their daily reading progress on a "reading log" that is signed by both teachers and parents. Teachers keep

track of students reading progress on a web-based database. The American Reading Company provides correlations in the 100 Book Challenge's leveling system with the CCSS/ELA stretch Lexile band. This allows teachers to use students' Lexile scores as well as their reading level as determined by the 100 Book Challenge conferences, in order to determine their appropriate level texts.

Strategies for Increasing Reading Levels

With the release of the CCSS/ELA, several strategies have surfaced for assisting students with accessing complex texts and promoting reading growth. Four major strategies include shared reading, partner reading, small group instruction, and independent reading. Each of these has their benefit for different types of readers.

Shared reading is a whole grouping teaching strategy in which the whole group is instructed using the same text. This strategy has been used for years, but can be adapted to address text complexity. In heterogeneous classrooms, students at varying levels are all given access to the same text. Educators can assist on-level and even below-level students in comprehending "stretch" or more challenging texts by providing instructional support. Educators may also link more challenging shared texts to lower level texts through theme and content. By providing students with background knowledge through these lower level texts, they come to whole group instruction better prepared to comprehend the more challenging text (Glasswell et al., 2010).

Partner reading is a strategy that allows students to become engaged in a text while working with a partnered peer. Typically, the pair includes an above-level reader and an on-level or below-level reader. The text of choice is at the level of the above-level reader so it is

challenge level text for the partner. Each of the students has a copy of the text and engages in partner reading. The higher-level student is the “leader” and serves as a model for the partner as they read through the text. Studies using this strategy showed progress among lower-level readers (Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000). This strategy allows students to not only collaborate, but exposes the lower-level student to challenging text in an engaging way.

Small group work allows educators to providing engaging instruction in which students are provided more one-one-one opportunities. During small group activities, educators are able to question students in a way they may not be able to in whole group instruction. This individualized type of questioning can help the reader develop meaning from the text they may not have during a whole group discussion. Students may also focus on smaller portions of more challenging texts in order to develop meaning. This form of “close” reading is less overwhelming than an entire text and can assist students in comprehending more difficult pieces of text. It is an important practice when implementing small groups to use flexible grouping. This allows students to be more fluid in their placement. As students make progress with their reading abilities, they are able to move to a group that better suits their needs. Groups do not only need to be created based on reading level or Lexile score, but can also be skill focused. This removes the stereotyping that sometimes comes with small groupings.

Independent reading can have great power when implemented properly. By building a classroom library full of multi-genre, informational, literary, and multiple level texts, students have an opportunity to choose books that strike their own interest. Interest surveys allow students to provide information about the type of books they like to read and the teacher, in return, is able to provide students with engaging books within their Lexile range. Students are able to see themselves as readers and this encourages the type of motivation needed to tackle more

challenging texts. During independent reading, teachers are provided with the opportunity to individually conference with students in order to monitor their progress (Glasswell et al., 2010).

Summary

The CCSS/ELA provides both educators and students with new challenges that require both rigor and motivation. A shift in the way reading comprehension and reading levels are viewed is taking place and this shift must carry over to instruction. In order to better prepare students to be college and career ready individuals, educators must take the steps needed to promote this type of competitiveness and work ethic in the classroom. With the proper implementation of text complexity and the strategies promoting this model educators have the ability to empower their students to become lifelong successful readers as well as lifelong successful learners.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The goal of this research was to determine the impact of small reading groups, independent reading, and partner reading on students' reading levels from on grade level to above grade level.

Design

The research design was quasi-experimental due to the non-randomization and convenience sampling used. A group of students reading below grade level were the control group and did not receive treatment, but took both the pre and post assessments. The treatment group of students received daily small group instruction, partner reading with an above grade level reader, and 15 minutes of independent reading daily. The pre and post tests were in the form of 100 Book Challenge reading levels as well as the students' RIT scores derived from the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) testing. Students' pre-test data was collected

The independent variable for this study was comprised of the strategies implemented. All students received the Baltimore County Curriculum, but the treatment group had daily small group instruction and was strategically paired for partner reading with above grade level readers. The dependent variables were the measurements of reading growth as determined by 100 Book Challenge levels and MAP RIT scores.

Participants

This research was conducted in a Title 1 Baltimore County Public School. The elementary school is located in the Northwest region of Baltimore County and has an enrollment of nearly 900 pre-kindergarten to fifth grade students. The participants were five third graders in the researcher's heterogeneously grouped reading class. Three of the five students were African

American. One student received ELL services with Spanish as her first language, and the other student was mixed race. The class make-up was quite diverse racially, economically, and academically. The school is located in a heavily populated area where most families live in rental properties. Transfers rates at this location are higher than most schools in the area. Almost 70% of the students at the school receive free and reduced meals. There is also a universal breakfast program in place at the school.

Instrument

One instrument was used to measure reading growth in this experiment. This instrument was the Northwest Evaluation Association's, (NWEA), Measure of Academic Progress, (MAP), assessment for Reading. This is a computer-based assessment used to measure achievement. The test is adaptive, meaning it adjusts to the students' individual levels as they complete the test. Students receive a RIT score and a Lexile range at the completion of testing. Reviews of this assessment found in *Buros Mental Measurements Yearbook*, (Cizek, et.al, 2012), discuss its reliability and validity. The validity of the MAP assessment, as discussed by the reviewers, is limited to concurrent measures with other assessments that are measures of academic progress, including the ALT assessment and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The reviewers discuss the MAP assessment as being quite reliable. Test-retest reliability shows the standard of error measurement to be low and the efficiency of the test to be high. The reviewers agree on the reliability of the MAP, that it proves to be reliable assessment. They discuss concurrent validity as the only measure for validity. They discuss the MAP Assessment as having a high degree of alignment between its content and the curriculum.

Procedure

This research study commenced in December 2013 as students were grouped based on their RIT scores and Lexile ranges. The five students for the treatment group were identified as on grade level readers and were formed into a small group. These students participated in 20-minute daily small group reading instruction. The group was transitioned from on grade level texts and small group work to accelerated texts and lessons from the curriculum. Treatment students were exposed to texts of varying complexity and were challenged with above grade level curriculum. During independent work, the treatment group was required to complete 15 minutes of independent reading of a text from their 100 Book Challenge Reading level, which as determined based on their baseline Lexile range, in addition to their required 30 minutes for homework. The five treatment students were paired with students reading above grade level according to their Lexile range for partner reading. Partner reading took place two times a week during independent work. The texts for partner reading were chosen based on the above grade levels Lexile range. Above grade level students were the lead readers as the treatment group students read along with their partners.

Student progress was monitored in small group through discussions based on text, written responses to text, and individual reading within the small group. Independent reading goals were documented on students' reading logs. Every 15 minutes were logged and monitored by both parents and the teacher. Students also logged their partner reading in their reading logs. The teacher monitored reading partners by assisting students in choosing texts and periodically listening in on partner reading sessions.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study compared pre-and post-RIT scores for the MAP Reading assessment of five third-grade students at the Baltimore County elementary school. These five students were given various reading activities and strategies such as small group instruction, independent reading, and paired reading. It was hypothesized that that implementation of reading strategies and activities would have no effect on students' reading level growth from on-grade level to above-grade level.

Students were given the MAP Reading Assessment in the beginning of the school year, Fall 2013. This pre-assessment provided a baseline RIT score for the five treatment students. These students were provided with the reading activities and strategies over the span of the school year. They were again given the MAP Reading Assessment at the end of the school year, Spring 2014. This post-assessment also provided RIT scores and served as the results data.

Table 1
Pre- and Post-Assessment RIT Scores and Lexile Ranges

Student	Fall '13 RIT	Spring '14 RIT	Fall '13 Lexile Range	Spring '14 Lexile Range
1	188	206	285-435L	609-759L
2	200	212	501-651L	717-867L
3	180	191	141-291L	339-489
4	204	199	573-723L	483-633L
5	189	196	303-453L	429-579L

A dependent *t*-test was run to examine the differences between students' fall and spring RIT scores. Results, displayed in Table 2, showed no significant difference [$t(4) = -2.246$, $p > .05$]. Students' RIT scores did not increase significantly due to the intervention. The null hypothesis was supported.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviation of Fall and Spring RIT Scores for the Group

Fall RIT Score	Spring RIT Score
192.2 (9.706)	200.8 (8.289)

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The null hypothesis for this study stated that implementation of reading strategies and activities would have no effect on students' reading-level growth from on-grade level to above-grade level. This null hypothesis was supported based on the data. Students' MAP assessment results stated they made no significant gains nor any significant losses over the treatment period, but remained solidly the same.

Implications of the Results

The null hypothesis may have been supported in this study due to some environmental factors as well as pedagogical and curricular factors. These changes involved the shift in curriculum to respond to the Common Core State Standards. This changed the make-up of the classrooms in this particular setting, moving away from homogenous and into heterogeneous groupings. The BCPS English and Language Arts curriculum underwent major changes in focus and content. All of these factors affected the pedagogical practices of teachers, making it more challenging in several aspects. The MAP pre-assessment not only provided RIT data for a baseline, but also the Lexile ranges for each student. Lexile ranges provided the teacher with information about the students' current reading levels and the type of texts that should be used for instruction.

The post-assessment MAP data provided an RIT score as well as Lexile ranges for each student. This data showed improvement in scores for 4 of the 5 students. The improvement, however, was not great enough to signify noteworthy changes. These increases in scores are the typical kind of growth one would expect to see in a student moving through a grade level. While students' scores did not indicate a significant growth in reading levels, an increase in motivation

and engagement over time, especially during small group instruction was observationally noted.

Threats to Validity

There were certainly some threats to the validity of the results throughout this study. These include the timeframe, size of the treatment group, form of assessment, and curricular changes. While this study took place over the course of a complete academic school year, the English Language Arts curriculum was undergoing many changes and these changes were being implemented, at some points, mid-unit. This made some instruction inconsistent with regard to skills, texts, and classroom routines. Consistency in the units and instruction began about one-third of the way into the school year. Instruction was also inconsistent due to many missed days of school because of snow. The size of the treatment group was quite small, focusing on only 5 out of 24 within the targeted third grade classroom. This smaller sampling size may not have provided enough of a population to truly gauge the results of the treatment. While the MAP assessment was an excellent measurement of the students' progress, it was the first time the students had ever been exposed to this type of assessment. The test is computer-based and self-paced. Some students may have rushed to finish or struggled completing a computer-based assessment. This academic year was quite transitional for both teachers and students, which may have influenced the instruction of the teacher, the performance of the students, and the overall results of this study.

Connections to Previous Studies

Not many studies have been conducted with regard to the CCSS because of its fairly new introduction but prior studies have been implemented to determine ways of improving students' reading abilities with regard to reading level. These studies found positive results when implementing the types of strategies also implemented within this study.

Glasswell et al., (2010), studied the benefits of exposing students to more challenging texts in combination with instructional-level texts, instead of students struggling with purely frustration-level texts. These researchers discussed the importance of using varying instructional supports in order to make these challenging texts more accessible to students who typically struggle. They found students to be more engaged and motivated by these texts, as opposed to the frustration demonstrated. Just as Glasswell et al., (2010) determined in their findings, treatment students in this study increased their participation and motivation when provided the opportunity to work with more challenging texts in combination with on-level texts. This took place during small group instruction in which whole group instruction was then scaffolded or enriched upon based on needs of the group.

Morgan et al., (2000) found success with the partner reading strategy. A higher-level student and a lower-level student were provided a copy of the text and engaged in partner reading. Studies using this strategy showed progress among lower-level readers. The higher-level student is the “leader” and serves as a model for the partner as they read through the text. This strategy allows students to not only collaborate, but exposes the lower-level student to challenging text in an engaging way. The same type of observations were made in this study, in which the treatment students were more motivated to read when coupled with a partner reading at a more advanced reading level.

Implications for Future Research

As more educators work with the ELA CCSS, the research studies in this area will no doubt increase. The goal set forth by these standards is for students to increase their abilities in order to read more complex text over their school careers as well as increasing reading comprehension across the elementary grades. With this as a common goal for all educators working with the

ELA CCSS, researchers will work to find the best strategies and implementation for teachers to move their students toward this common goal. It would be wise for future researchers to be fluent in the curriculum to be taught, make sure students were comfortable and experienced in the form of assessment, and maintain a solid level of consistency. This study is just the “tip of the iceberg” when it comes to research within this new wave of educational reform. The threats to validity and outcomes of this research may be helpful in future studies by providing some guidelines to maintain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although the null hypothesis was supported in this study, it is believed that further research and longer experimentation timeframes may support a positive hypothesis. This study was conducted on a very small scale in a less than ideal academic school year. In hindsight, the study would have yielded more accurate results if conducted at a different time. The study however, does open the doors to continued research and adjustment of instruction for upcoming academic school years. The implementation CCSS is a shift for all educators, but with research such as this study, more motivating and successful ways of moving students toward the common goal of reaching and comprehending those more complex texts is attainable.

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