

**Read-Alouds and Their Impact on Reading Comprehension on First Graders**

**by**

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Mean DIBELS score on the pre and post-test

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether read-aloud strategies would positively affect the reading comprehension achievement of a selected group of first graders over the course of a school year. The measurement tool was DIBELS assessment, dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills. This study involved the use of a pretest/posttest design to compare data from September, 2008 to May of 2009. The hypothesis of this study was supported and there was a significant difference between pre and post test. These results could be attributable to a number of factors. However, research suggests that read-aloud strategies should be used in the primary classrooms in order to help with reading comprehension.

## **CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION**

Reading comprehension is a major component of reading; however, it is a complex process which contains many varied learning elements. It is a process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with text. Comprehension is one of the most important skills for students to develop if they are to become successful and productive adults. Comprehension instruction must begin at a very young age, even before a child begins to read. It is crucial that children are read to by family, friends and parents in order for them to get a positive start once they begin school. At the beginning of elementary school, children are learning to form letters into sounds, sounds into words, and words into sentences. These sentences must have meaning to the readers. Many young students are excellent readers at a young age, however if they cannot obtain meaning and comprehend the material, there is little purpose.

Teachers can use many comprehensive strategies in the classroom which will benefit comprehension. Using read-alouds and storytelling are among the most important. As a first grade teacher at Cromwell Valley Elementary school in Baltimore County, this is the researcher's fifth year teaching first grade. Over the past few years, it has been noticed that although many first grade students are reading at a second, third and even fourth grade level, their comprehension skills are not as highly developed. Many of these children were able to pick up a book, read it fluently, decode unfamiliar words, blend sounds and remember their phonics rules. However, they were unable to have a discussion about theme, problems and events that occurred in the story. Many good readers have developed this problem.

The lack of comprehension skills can cause many problems as children grow.

Comprehension is the reason for reading and provides meaning to the material. Without proper comprehension skills, students will struggle in the area of reading. They will be unable to understand, discuss and investigate important information they may need as they enter adulthood.

Read-alouds are something that most first grade students love. They love being read to, no matter what the story. This study was conducted over an entire school year in order to find out if read-alouds and storytelling impact reading comprehension in first graders.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether read-alouds and storytelling benefit reading comprehension in first grade students.

### **Statement of Hypothesis**

Students who use read-aloud strategies and practices in the classroom and incorporate them into their daily routine will increase their reading comprehension skills.

### **Operational Definitions**

Within this study, the independent variable was the read-aloud strategies and storytelling strategies. Read-alouds were operationalized with a variety of strategies such as reading out loud by the teacher and working with the students. The independent variable in this study was reading comprehension which was measured using the DIBELS test that was given in the beginning as well as at the end of the school year.

## **CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This literature review examines strategies that may be used in order to improve reading comprehension in young children. Section One discusses the effectiveness of oral language and read-alouds and suggests how they can be properly used in the classroom. Section Two analyzes teacher modeling. Section Three explores the steps of modification, and Section Four investigates the idea of fluency through read-alouds.

### **Oral Language to Listening Comprehension**

Comprehension skills do not begin in the classroom although people may think that is the case. As soon as children are able to speak, express themselves orally, and communicate, they are developing comprehensive strategies (Gold, 2001). Once children become careful listeners, they are better able to comprehend material at their reading level. "The development of oral language is one of children's most impressive accomplishments that occur during the first five years of life" (Isbell & Sobol, 2004, p.157). Therefore, it is essential that parents speak and communicate with their children even before they reach school age, so children are ready for formal instruction that will promote comprehension.

Enhancing read-alouds in the classroom has been shown to improve reading comprehension. In 2004, Hickman and Fisher found that "effective read-alouds contribute to student's comprehension development", as cited in Santaro (Santaro, 2004, p.396). Students who are listening to an engaging story are using comprehension skills, although they have not been formally taught. Read-alouds with comprehensive instruction and modeling brought into the story can promote comprehension as well, as children are learning to read (Isbell, 2004). Before a teacher can use read-alouds effectively though, children must have mastered listening comprehension skills (Santaro, 2008). In 2004, Garner and Bochna, through their research, found that "knowledge gleaned from instructional strategies employing

repeated presentation, explicit explanation, modeling and questioning, transferred from one literacy activity to another in novice readers”, as cited by Gold (Gold, 2001, p.19).

Effective read-alouds incorporate structured, interactive teacher and student text-based discussions as opposed to read-alouds with no discussion at all. A classroom read-aloud should create opportunities for students to reflect and make connections to the material. Since vocabulary is an extremely important part of comprehension, read-alouds can provide a perfect teacher-centered approach for introducing new words. For example, if during a classroom read-aloud, if a group comes across an unfamiliar word, teachers can then stop, explain the word, use it in other ways, give examples, then go back and read that word in the story again. This may completely change the way students comprehend the text.

There are certain things teachers should do before, during, and after a read-aloud lesson. Before beginning the lesson, discussing the purpose for reading is important. According to Santaro, KWL chart is also an effective teaching tool for teachers (Santaro, 2008). During the read-aloud, discussions about characters, plot, events, and personal connections are important. There are also higher level questions that teachers should be using when appropriate. After reading, teachers should model how to retell a story (Santaro, 2008). Meaningful experiences during these early years can provide language opportunities that will enhance language growth. Students will have an excellent grasp on comprehension skills and will be prepared for more challenging comprehension skills (Isbell & Sobol, 2004).

Teachers who are modeling how to activate schema and prior knowledge are using a strategy that will help students learn how to activate background knowledge. Background knowledge is an important factor for creating meaning. Students activate this background knowledge before reading, so that the information connected with concepts or topics can be understood in the text easily. Visuals and graphic organizers help students to see how previously known concepts are related to new ones.

According to Keene and Zimmermann “Teachers teach students how to make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections so that readers can more easily comprehend the texts as they read”, as cited by Pardo (Pardo, 2004, pg.278). Teacher modeling and reading aloud show students how to activate schema (Pardo, 2004).

### **Modeling**

Students become effective comprehenders once teachers understand how text, reading style, and context create meaning within students. Comprehension occurs in the transaction between the reader and the text. “Meaning emerges only from the engagement of that reader with that text at that particular moment” (Pardo, 2004, p.272). It is true that more motivated readers are likely to apply more comprehension strategies and work harder at building meaning than those readers who are less motivated. The best possible strategies for teachers to use in order to support first graders in becoming competent readers are teaching decoding skills, helping to build fluency, activating background knowledge, teaching vocabulary and motivating and engaging students. However, before these strategies can be integrated into the learning process, teacher modeling must occur (Beck, 2001).

Modeling is such a natural part of teachers’ instruction that it is often used instinctively. Teacher modeling with read-alouds shows students how to make connections to their materials (Pardo, 2004). While reading a story to children, teachers may pause in order to ask questions about characters, plot, or setting; rather than being rhetorical, teachers then answer these questions themselves (Santoro, 2008). For example, while reading the story *The Mitten*, teachers, after reading the part in which the animals gather inside the mitten, may say, “I wonder what the fox is thinking?” or, “This reminds me of a time...” Modeling is teacher-to-teacher without input from students. Without modeling, children are unable to work independently. Modeling is a critical part of early childhood education (Isbell & Sobol, 2004).

### Questioning

Once teachers have used teacher –to- teacher modeling, interactive teacher and student text-based discussions can then be introduced. This step includes opportunities for students to reflect on the material and make their own connections. In this scenario, teachers may pause and ask direct questions to the students. For example, while reading a story to the students, questions asked may include: “What do you think will happen next?” “What is the setting of the story?” or “Why do you think the kitten ran away?” Moving on to a higher level of questioning, teachers use questions such as, “Have you ever had a picnic like Sally did in the story?” or “Does Sally remind you of someone you know?” According to researchers, most elementary aged students enjoy sharing and discussing books (Ayers, 1991). They love to analyze not only the story itself, but they also love comparing and contrasting two stories with similar characteristics.

In the research completed by Santoro in 2008, specific questions to be used before, during, and after reading are given. Before reading, teachers want to identify the purpose for reading and may ask students to predict using the title and the cover illustrations. This step helps build background knowledge as well as confidence in students. Background knowledge is an important factor for creating meaning. During reading, teachers may use questioning that will enable students to make connections such as text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world. Students may now use context clues to confirm or make further predictions. Questioning after reading may include retelling and summarizing queries.

### Vocabulary

Vocabulary is a critical part of all phases of reading. Teachers incorporate vocabulary study before, during, and after reading aloud. According to Isbell & Sobol (2004), the elementary classroom is the perfect place to explore language with children. It is in this environment that students can naturally enrich their vocabulary.

Before reading to students, teachers must plan and identify critical vocabulary words which will be introduced in the story. Some of these words may be completely foreign to the students; students may recognize other words, but are not familiar with them in this context. Teachers must be certain that the selected words are necessary for making meaning with the text (Pardo, 2004). One method that teachers may use is to stop during a read-aloud to discuss an unfamiliar word. After rereading the sentence, the students should have a better sense of the word's meaning in context.

After reading, teachers may extend the vocabulary study and review the new words which were introduced in the story. Teachers may also use vocabulary extension activities such as word games or using the new vocabulary in sentences (Dwyer, 1998). Read-alouds foster many communication opportunities in talking about both the text and the illustrations from the stories (Isbell & Sobol, 2004). Children who are exposed to read-alouds along with vocabulary introduction are able to use more complex sentences as well as have increased literal and inferential comprehension skills.

### **Motivation**

Read-alouds provide a great deal more than vocabulary and comprehension skills for young readers. They also give students the opportunities for motivation and enable them to become independent students through several methods.

Teachers can motivate students by providing them with choices that will engage them in reading. For example, if students enjoy building sand castles, a natural progression is for teachers to suggest books about the beach or about how medieval castles were constructed (Pardo, 2004). If students are fascinated with thunderstorms, teachers may interest them in books about weather or a biography of Ben Franklin.

Sharing with peers is another great motivator that read-alouds can provide. Students love to read stories to their classmates. Knowing that their skills are going to be observed through their

expression, word pronunciation, and influencing will usually have students working hard in order to be given the privilege of reading to their peers (Hollingsworth & Sherman, 2007).

According to Grattan (1997) as cited by Pardo (2004) book clubs are another way to motivate students. “While this program initially focused on the intermediate grades, many teachers have found that students in first and second grades are successful comprehenders when they read and engage in book clubs.” (Pardo, 2004, pg.274). Book clubs are literature-based approaches which incorporate both aesthetics and efficacy, as they give children the chance for discussion with peers in an informal setting.

### **Fluency**

Students can focus more on comprehension once they become more fluent readers. Modeling and repeated readings are additional ways to build fluency, as well as using readers’ theaters. Pardo believes that a successful strategy for building fluency is by reading aloud to the students (Pardo, 2004).

Teachers encourage students to participate in repeated readings for real purposes. According to Morrow and Grambell (2000) as cited by Pardo “Reading aloud to students is the single most effective way to increase comprehension.” (Pardo, 2004, pg.275). In turn, this comprehension leads to reading more smoothly and thus to fluency.

Careful choosing of in-class books for read-alouds is crucial. As researcher Santoro states:

“ Criteria we considered when selecting books and determining the themes for read-aloud instruction include the book’s topic, target audience, length, cost, availability, representation of diversity, text coherence, and potential for connections to other texts and topics addressed in the first grade curriculum.” (Santoro, 2008, pg.400)

Liebling’s (1989) data indicates that the quality of text is of the utmost importance in helping students become fluent readers. Therefore, choosing appropriate books for read-alouds – ones which are of high quality and meet the needs of the students – will lead to improved comprehension and fluency skills.

### **Summary**

Comprehension is the reason for reading. When children begin to use oral language, communicate, and understand others, they can begin their comprehension process. It is extremely

important for all teachers to know and understand reading comprehension strategies that can make children successful. When children finally reach a high level of comprehension, they become more motivated to read. Material becomes exciting, engaging, and interesting. When children reach a satisfactory level of comprehension, they should be able to clarify words and sentences that are not easily understood, summarize parts of the text, make connections to the text, recognize story structure, and answer and even generate questions.

Research has shown that read-alouds can promote comprehension. Santoro (Santoro, 2008, pg.398) states it well when he says:

Incorporating comprehension instruction and read-alouds appears to be a promising way to boost student comprehension. There are certainly times when read-alouds can simply focus on the enjoyment of books, however, \ read-alouds must be carefully planned if they are to affect student comprehension. Making the *very* most of read-aloud time requires teaching students to recognize the differences between narrative and informational text structure, to know the meanings of target vocabulary, and to become active participants in purposeful discussions about texts.

Reading aloud to students has power (Gold, 2001). Memorable stories involve children in active learning. Read-alouds allow for the first steps in life-long reading to germinate.

## **CHAPTER THREE METHODS**

This study consisted of a pre/post-test design. The class of first graders was tested in the beginning of the school year using the DIBELS test (dependent variable) in September and tested again in May on the same test. This test measured student's letter naming fluency, phoneme segmentation fluency, nonsense word fluency, oral reading fluency and comprehension. The independent variable was read-alouds strategies provided throughout the year by the teacher.

### **Participants**

The participants used in this study were twenty-four first graders at Cromwell Valley Elementary. Eleven boys and thirteen girls were used to conduct this study. The ages of these students were six or seven years. The group consisted of two Hispanic students, two African American students, and twenty Caucasian students.

### **Instrument**

The instrument used in this study was the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), which was created at the University of Oregon. DIBELS is used in all elementary schools in the Baltimore County School District. This test measures a variety of reading skills in kindergarten, first and second graders such as letter naming, phoneme segmentation, nonsense word fluency, oral reading and comprehension and retell. Although DIBELS is given annually to about 2 million schoolchildren in the United States and sometimes even three times a year, there is much debate about the validity and reliability of the assessment. Kenneth S. Goldman, a professor at the University of Arizona states, "It is an absurd set of silly little one-minute tests

that never get close to measuring what reading is really about -- making sense of print” (Goldman, 2004, pg.B02). Goldman, as well as others believes that this assessment does not encompass everything that is needed for reading comprehensive instruction and focuses too much on speed. However, Goodman does believe that this assessment has “one sensible, albeit optional, subtest - "Retelling" (Goldman, 2004, pg.B02). The retell section of this assessment is what was used on the first graders to measure their comprehension.

### **Procedure**

In September, the students were pulled out individually by the classroom teacher and taken to a quiet room. The teacher showed the students a story entitled, *Spring is Coming*. The teacher read specific directions to the student, “Read this out loud. If you get stuck, I will tell you the word so that you can keep reading. When I say STOP, I may ask you to tell me about what you have just read, so do your best reading, start here”. After the teacher repeated those directions, each student read as much as he/she could from the story. After one minute, the teacher said STOP and took the story away from the student. The teacher then asked the students to talk about the story and asked them what they remembered reading. As the student spoke, the teacher counted the number of words the student spoke in response to the question. This was repeated with two more stories as well as the other twenty three students in the class. This data was evaluated, scored and put aside until the end of the school year.

Throughout the school year, the teacher used various read aloud strategies with the group of students in order to manipulate the experiment. Although the teacher read aloud to her class often, there were certain strategies she used each week with the class. Once a week

the teacher would use a read- aloud from the reading curriculum. The children would listen as the teacher would read a story to them from a Big Book, showing them pictures and asking questions during reading. The class would discuss the Big Book, before, during and after reading using only eyes and ears. As the year progressed, the teacher began to use stories with no pictures, continuing to question throughout the story.

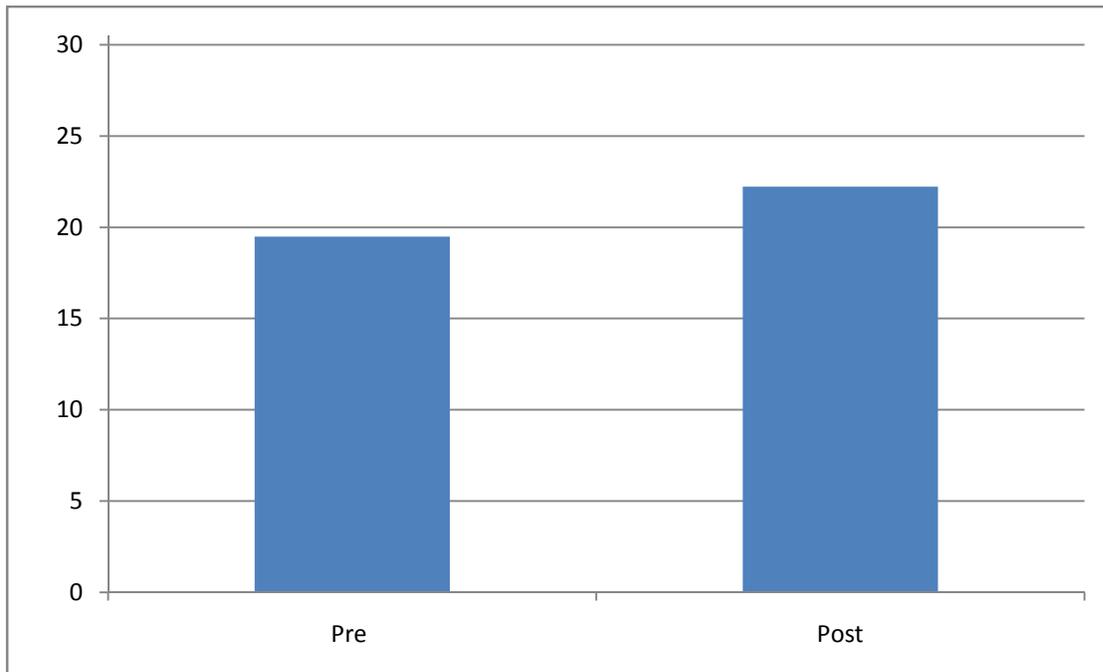
Two days out of the week, the children would use a story from their first grade anthology. In this case each child would have a book filled with stories. Each week the class would work on a different story and used the skill they were learning at the time to apply to the story, such as a problem and solution, cause and effect, setting, characters, comparing and contrasting and making inferences. The children would sit around the perimeter of the rug in the classroom and listen to each other read. Then the children would read the story again in unison, known as choral reading. In this case, not only did the students listen to the teacher read aloud, they were also able to listen to their classmates.

One day a week the teacher used another strategy where they students were asked to use their visualizing skills. The teacher read a series of books to the class, *Magic Tree House* books written by Mary Pope Osborne. These are chapter books with very few pictures, but filled with fun and adventure. After the teacher read a chapter to the class, she gave each student a large piece of construction paper. As she read, she asked the students to visualize in their heads and draw what they visualize happening in the chapter. Not only did the children enjoy this, but as the year progressed, the drawings became much more detailed. This pattern continued each week from September to the end of the school year in May.

## CHAPTER IV RESULTS

This study showed that there was a significant increase between the pre and post-test,  $t(23)=-5.72, p<.05$ . On the pre-test the mean was 19.50 which increased to 22.33 on the post-test.

Figure 1: Mean DIBELS score on the pre and post-test



## **CHAPTER V DISCUSSION**

The original hypothesis in this study was supported. It was expected that there would be an increase in reading comprehension skills when using read-alouds in the classroom on a daily basis. Students who used read-aloud strategies and practices in the classroom and incorporated them into their daily routine showed an increase in their reading comprehension skills from pre to post test. By the end of first grade the students who participated in this study were slightly above average in their reading comprehension, ( $m=22.33$ ).

### **Implications**

This intervention of using read-alouds and read aloud strategies in the classroom did have an impact on reading comprehension in first graders, as other researchers have agreed. Using this data and the recommendations provided in this study, school educators can be made aware of the benefits provided to the participants of the intervention. Because students use comprehension skills to understand and create meaning from text, students will not only succeed in the area of reading, but other educational subjects as well and will continue into adulthood.

### **Threats to Validity**

There were two threats to validity that pertain to this study, history and maturation. Because this study was conducted over an entire school year, there may be other factors that contributed to the increase in reading comprehension. In the classroom, first graders are working daily on their phonics rules, reading skills, fluency practices and phonemic awareness. As the year progresses, these students improve in these areas, which can also contribute to the

success of their reading comprehension skills. Fluency plays a large role in reading comprehension. Once students are able to read at a fluent pace, they are no longer concentrating on the decoding of the words, but on the meaning of the text.

Maturation may have also played a role in this study. As many educators know, first grade students mature a tremendous amount throughout the school year. Many students, by the end of the year, are more able to sit, listen quietly, and concentrate on the meaning of the text or story, which is something many young students struggle with at the beginning of the year.

### **Similar Studies**

Similar studies indicate that read-alouds and the use of read-aloud strategies do lead to an increase in reading comprehension. In 2004, Hickman and Fisher noted that “effective read-alouds contribute to student’s comprehension development”, as cited in (Santoro, 2004, p.396) They found that reading comprehension skills are automatically used, even before being formally taught, when a teacher reads a story to the class. This may be true for the students who participated in this study.

Throughout this study, teacher modeling took place, before, during and after reading, which supports Santoro’s thoughts on increasing reading comprehension. He believed that there are certain things teachers should do before, during, and after a read aloud lesson. Before beginning the lesson, discussing the purpose for reading is important. During the read -aloud, discussions about characters, plot, events, and personal connections are important. After reading, teachers should model how to retell a story (Santoro, 2008). Pardo also believed that teacher modeling will show students how to make connections to the material (Pardo 2004).

## **Future Research**

The researcher proposes two other avenues for future research regarding achievement in reading comprehension: a shorter study period, which may help remove other factors that may contribute to student's success and a different assessment, such as one created by the teacher that would measure comprehension skills.

It may be more beneficial to use a week long block of time at the beginning of the school year for read-aloud strategies, continuing with the pre/post test design. In this case, other factors such as phonics, decoding and fluency will not be much of an issue. The focus will be strictly on the read-alouds and read-aloud intervention strategies.

Although DIBELS assessment plays an important role in the classroom and allows teachers to have a closer look at the progress of students, it would have greater benefited this study if the retell section of the test were a little more specific. The retell section of this test asks the teacher to count the number of words the student uses to discuss the story in a time span of one minute, which measures their comprehension skills. A more informal assessment, created by the teacher would be of greater use for this study. A teacher created test would consist of more in depth questions, such as; who are the characters, what was the problem in the story, or where did the story take place. This would also allow the assessment piece to be not so intimidating to the students.

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