How Peer Interaction Influences Independent Reading

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Abstract

What should a teacher do when elementary students are disengaged during not-so-quiet independent reading time? In this study, second grade students in a rural school were given the opportunity to talk about their books after independent reading, seeking to answer the question: How will peer interaction motivate students to read independently? After judging students’ motivation to read through the Elementary Reading Attitudes Survey, the teacher used student interviews and observation to evaluate students’ engagement in independent reading and assessed their comprehension through observation, reading logs, and Accelerated Reader quiz scores. While students’ AR quiz scores showed inconclusive results on the impact of this intervention on comprehension, students generally enjoyed having the opportunity to interact with each other about the books they were reading. However, English language learners were the exception in this study. Students need the opportunity to socialize about books in a structured and strategic way to grow in their literacy development, but more research should be done on the scaffolding needed for ELLs to be successful in this peer interaction as well.

*Keywords*: independent reading, peer interaction, elementary reading

How Peer Interaction Influences Independent Reading

An onlooker in my second grade classroom might be overwhelmed to be the proverbial fly on the wall during our daily independent reading time. Many of my students are only marginally interested in reading, and they would much rather talk and giggle with each other than lose themselves in a story. At Duncan Elementary, we have twenty minutes set aside each day for monitored independent reading practice (affectionately known as our MIRP time) when students are allowed to choose their own books and I have the opportunity to conference with them individually about their reading. Even with this freedom of choice and close monitoring, I have several disengaged students who only pretend to read or who never settle down to choose one book to read at all.

**Related Research**

In the area of independent reading motivation, multiple studies have shown a correlation between students who read frequently for pleasure and students who perform well on reading assessments, giving teachers enough of a foundation to encourage independent reading in the classroom and to motivate students to love reading (Gambrell, Marinak, Brooker, & McCrea-Andrews, 2011). For this reason, Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2010) write that “engaged reading is a critical goal for educators to set for their students” (p. 313). However, even after putting procedures in place to teach students to choose the books that are best suited to their own reading abilities and interests and meeting with students individually during MIRP time to conference about their reading, my students still struggle to maintain focus and engage in real independent reading.

In digging into others’ research on the topic, I discovered that students also need a time to engage socially with their peers about what they are reading. As if it weren’t self-evident, Sanden (2014) assures us that “By their very nature, many elementary students have a propensity to be social” (p. 171). In a study on creating an environment in the classroom that is supportive of independent reading, Gambrell (1996) states that “social collaboration promotes achievement, high level cognition, and intrinsic desire to read” (p. 22). Reutzel and Juth (2014) also write that “discussion and social interaction around texts promotes development of higher-level literacy skills and increases students’ intrinsic motivation for reading and writing. Discussion and social interactions about text also increase students’ appreciation and understanding of text” (p. 34). Our students need the opportunity to reflect on their own reading and discuss what they have discovered with others because, as Hilden and Jones (2012) assert, “Literacy is an inherently social process” (p. 19).

Taking this research into consideration for my own students led me to realize that while I was explicitly teaching students to choose books wisely and talking with them about their reading in conferences, I had not provided them an opportunity to engage with one another about the books they read. Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006) created an independent reading framework called R5 that includes time for students to read, then reflect independently, and finally share out their insights and takeaways with a partner and later with the class. I modified this idea for my study and decided to provide my students with five minutes after our MIRP time to reflect on their reading and record their thoughts on a reading log before meeting with a small group of their peers to share their books with each other. I sought to find an answer to the question, How will peer interaction motivate my students to read independently? Will that interaction improve students’ independent reading comprehension?

**Study Site and Participants**

My classroom is one of two second grade classes at Duncan Elementary School, one of the five elementary schools in a small rural town in the mid-south. There are 24 children in my class, including eight English language learners, two of whom have just moved to the country this year. I started teaching at Duncan Elementary in January after moving to the area at the beginning of the year.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Project Activity | Objective |
| 03.21.16 | Send home parent consent forms | To inform parents of the study and their children’s involvement |
| 03.29.16 – 03.30.16 | Conduct pre-study interviews | To collect students’ opinions of independent reading time and their suggestions for improving MIRP |
| 04.04.16 – 04.08.16 | Collect observations of MIRP time | To determine students’ engagement in independent reading before implementing the intervention |
| 04.06.16 | Give students Elementary Reading Attitude Survey | To determine students’ initial motivation for independent reading |
| 04.08.16 | Collect Accelerated Reader quiz scores for pre-study data | To create baseline data by which to judge effectiveness of intervention on students’ comprehension |
| 04.11.16 – 04.14.16 | Teach mini-lessons for peer interaction | To give students guidelines on how to share books with each other effectively |
| 04.11.16 – 04.14.16 | Collect observations of MIRP time with peer interaction | To determine students’ engagement in independent reading after implementing the intervention and to judge their comprehension of books they shared with peers |
| 04.18.16 – 04.19.16 | Conduct post-study interviews | To gather students’ opinions of MIRP time with peer interaction |
| 04.21.16 | Collect Accelerated Reader quiz scores for post-study data | To evaluate comprehension after the intervention |

During this four-week study, I had my students complete the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) to judge their initial response to independent reading. Then I conducted student interviews with six randomly selected students about their response to independent reading time and thoughts regarding how the time could be improved. I kept written observation notes and transcribed video recordings of students’ participation and interaction during the 20-minute MIRP time for two weeks – one week before giving students the opportunity to collaborate and interact with their peers and one week after implementing this new procedure. I also collected scores from Accelerated Reader book quizzes from the two weeks prior to the study and the two weeks after implementation and analyzed students’ responses on reading logs during the study to check students’ comprehension.

**Preliminary Findings**

Before completing this study of our MIRP time, I thought my students’ off-task behavior was a sign that they weren’t motivated to read. Based on the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990), my students fall within an average range of reading motivation. Even my ESL students understood the importance of reading, in the words of Jose, “Because reading you learn everything.” Many of my students considered this independent reading time to be fun and not part of classwork. In a pre-study interview when asked how he felt about quiet reading time, Derrick said that he liked it, “Because I finally get to read and I don’t have to do work!” Based on these interviews and survey results, the cause of my students’ behavior during MIRP time must be based on something other than motivation. Perhaps the issue could be lack of structure or organization of MIRP time that causes off-task behavior.

That is where peer interaction during MIRP time brought positive results. Even before initiating the change in independent reading to include a time of reflection and sharing with peers, James, one of my students with an IEP in reading, made the suggestion to “change the books [and] ask your friends to change [and] read their book.” By talking with their peers after quiet reading time, students received affirmation about their book choices and recommendations for new books to try. Amy said, “When they talked about the books, it made me wanted to read the books they were reading – like the book Brandon had. And now I’m probably going to read it.” This motivation for further reading resulted from the excitement generated as students shared facts and stories from the books they read during quiet reading time. When asked about the new changes to MIRP time, Derrick commented, “We started doing the reading logs and doing the books and then it just got all fun.” After I asked him to elaborate on what made the reading time more fun, Derrick responded, “Getting to talk to your friends!...So you can share something… It’s so much better than just talking by yourself… Cause if it just stayed like the way it was, then the only time we would’ve been able to talk to our friends is at lunch and recess.” Although some students had been naturally sharing facts from their books with each other before this study, implementing this reflection and sharing time after reading made some of my most reluctant readers see the importance of talking about reading. For example, Steven, a struggling reader, spent some time during MIRP reading with a tutor, Mrs. Caldwell. When it came time to share about what he had read, he shared with Mrs. Caldwell and then asked her to find a book that she could talk about with him, too. He understood that the conversation about books should be a dialogue and wanted Mrs. Caldwell to participate with him.

However, not all of my students experienced such success in collaborating and conversing with their peers. I especially noted this among my English language learners. In an interview after the study, Jose responded, “I was still not talking because I don’t know.” Jose felt that he lacked the vocabulary or confidence necessary to interact with his peers about the books he was reading. During the MIRP time, two of my ESL students continued flipping through books instead of really reading, just as they had done before I started providing time for students to talk together about what they were reading. Ahn, a student who moved to the U.S. this year from Vietnam, had his head down during his group’s conversation. Instead of talking with his peers about his book, Ahn shoved his reading log toward his group so that they could read when he wrote. Other students in his group didn’t give him enough time to share what he read, but simply moved on to the next person in their group. These language learners still need more scaffolding to read independently and successfully, and face further difficulties because they feel ostracized or ignored during group conversations because of their limited English and are therefore less likely to participate in verbal collaboration.

There was also some confusion and misunderstanding among the other students in my class about how this collaboration and sharing time should work. Some students tried to read each others’ reading logs instead of using the logs to jog their memories about what they read themselves so that they could share in conversation with their groups. Other students read their books aloud to their partners instead of just talking about the books. I was most disappointed with a group of more advanced readers whom I expected to have deeper conversations about their books. These students hadn’t taken the time I had given them to reflect on their reading and write in their reading logs and therefore couldn’t even start their conversations about their books.

Furthermore, only 9 of my 24 students showed improvement on their AR Quiz scores after implementing peer interaction time after MIRP, and only one student read and took quizzes on more books. The reading logs they completed showed a basic understanding of the books they were reading, but many times their responses were simple statements of, “I like it,” or “happy,” or “I think it was telling something interesting.”

**Implications**

My students’ desire to be social is evident. They enjoyed being given the freedom to talk to each other in class, no matter what the topic. Some of them need this time for reasons so much greater than improvement in comprehension. In a post-study interview, Amy shared, “I couldn’t really talk to no one at my house or nothing and I felt like nobody cared about me… It feels like you’re lonely because you can’t talk to nobody and you’re just really excited.” For Amy, having someone to talk to about books and having someone listen is beyond meaningful. It is essential to her growth as a student and as an individual. If only for students like Amy, this time for social engagement about books is worth the time and effort.

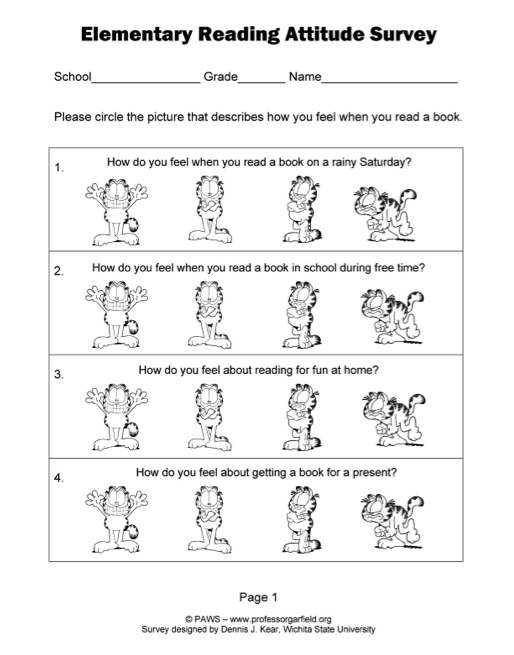
Because of the confusion and misunderstanding I noticed during this study, I would like to take more time at the beginning of the year next year to introduce reading strategies before teaching students how to talk about books. Setting up the procedure of how to read and comprehend text independently by making connections, visualizing, determining importance, and so on could equip students with the tools they need to tackle and talk about texts on their own. This more detailed and explicit instruction would provide even my English language leaners with vocabulary that could be useful in their conversations about books and could improve the quality of their responses as they read and discuss.

**Reflections**

Through this action research process, I have learned many lessons about my students as readers and about myself as a reflective practitioner. Before this study, I thought my students’ talking was a problem that distracted them from the important work: their independent reading. Now I have come to realize that reading doesn’t happen in a vacuum. My students need the opportunity to talk with each other about books in a structured and strategic way to grow in their literacy development. I also saw myself becoming more and more frustrated when my students’ work failed to live up to my expectations. When their behavior or comprehension scores didn’t show the results I expected, I would become irritated with the eight-year-olds who look to me to teach them. Although this research process is meant to help me grow as a teacher, I was putting blame of my students and not seeking to find answers in my own practice. Research, as beneficial as it may be for the progress of education, will always be secondary to the wellness of my own dear students. Their growth should remain central in my focus as I work to discern the best methods to use in helping them grow.

Figure 1

*Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*



This figure is part of page one of the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) that I used to determine reading motivation before beginning this study.

Figure 2

*Elementary Reading Attitudes Survey Responses*

Note: This chart represents the range of percentile scores on the Elementary Reading Attitudes Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) from 23 of the students in my class. The average score was 51.74%.

Figure 3

*Codebook for Interviews and Observations*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Theme | Definition | Example from Data | Interpretation |
| Motivation and feelings about reading | How a student feels during independent reading time and motivation to read | Jose: Good… Because reading you learn everything.  James: I’m happy to read… Because you can read better.  Derrick: Because I finally get to read and I don’t have to do work. | ESL student understands importance of reading!  Readers make better readers!  Derrick also mentioned that during this time he reads and thinks – interesting that this isn’t considered WORK to him! |
| Positive peer interaction | How peer interaction impacted students’ perception of independent reading time POSITIVELY | Amy: And you can also talk to them like it feels like you’re lonely because you can’t talk to nobody and you’re just really excited. I couldn’t really talk to no one at my house or nothing and I felt like nobody cared about me. When they talked about the books, it made me wanted to read the books they were reading – like the book Brandon had. And now I’m probably going to read it. | Excitement from interacting with peers  Interaction with peers built classroom community and helped students feel part of something bigger  Book recommendations from peers gave students motivation to continue reading in a different genre. |
| Negative peer interaction | How peer interaction impacted students’ perception of independent reading NEGATIVELY | Jose: I was still not talking because I dunno…  Some students interrupt others during MIRP time to ask to read their books or talk about their books. | ESL students didn’t have the vocabulary or confidence necessary to interact with peers  Students wanted to talk about books during what was meant to be quiet reading time, distracting and disrupting others. |
| Confusion or misunder-  standing | How the project confused some students or the process was misunderstood | Have you already had a chance to share about all three of your books?  Michael: Nope.  Then who’s going next? Katherine: She didn’t - we all didn’t do it yet.  So what have we been doing standing here, guys?  Michael: Finishing our work. | Students [in a group of more advanced readers whom I expected to have deeper conversations about their books] didn’t complete their work during MIRP time and so they couldn’t start their conversations about their books. |

Figure 4

*Interview Questions*

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| --- |
| Pre-Study: |
| 1. Tell me about how you feel during our quiet reading time.  2. What do you usually do during MIRP time?  3. If you could change something about quiet reading time, what would you change? |
| Post-Study: |
| 1. How has our MIRP time changed the past two weeks?  2. Tell me how you feel about sharing about your books with your friends. |

Figure 5

*Students’ Independent Reading Log*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| MONDAY | * FICTION   Title:  Characters:  Problem:  Your thoughts: | * NONFICTION   Title:  Main Ideas: (HINT: Use headings, captions, diagrams, etc.)  One Interesting Fact:  Your thoughts: |

Students completed a teacher-created independent reading log each day after MIRP time to have a chance to collect their thoughts before sharing about their books in small groups of two or three students.

Figure 6

*Average AR Quiz Scores Before and After Study Implementation*

Note: Students’ scores on Accelerated Reader book quizzes before and after implementing this study show that the use of peer interaction as an intervention for increasing comprehension on independent reading provided inconclusive results.

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