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Learning to Lead Reading Comprehension

Discussion

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Abstract

In this article, we describe and reflect on a collaborative, school-based professional development project (an ‘intervention’) intended to encourage innovation in classroom teaching. Specifically, the intervention included a collaboration between university-based researchers/mentors and primary school teachers in Singapore who were interested in discovering new strategies for reading comprehension instruction. The results show that by working together, over time, teachers were able to innovate by adopting new strategies for leading reading comprehension discussions and adapting the new strategies to fit the local teaching context. Crucially, the innovation found that ‘learning’ the new strategies was insufficient; teachers needed professional support from the teacher trainers and their collaborating colleagues as well as time—over three years—to develop their expertise and their confidence in the implementation of the new strategies.

Keywords

Classroom innovation, professional development, reading comprehension, primary school, Singapore

Introduction

Innovating in classroom practices can be difficult especially in contexts, such as Singapore’s, which have a required subject syllabus, national curriculum with accompanying materials and recommended teaching strategies, and high stakes examinations which can limit teachers’ perceptions of their own agency (e.g. Albright and Kramer-Dahl, 2009; Towndrow, Silver and Albright, 2010). In addition, whole-sale adoption of strategies from other countries or educational contexts can be inappropriate due to conflicts with local expectations and norms (e.g. Sripathy, 2007; Stroupe, 2012; Pham and Renshaw, 2015). How, then, can teachers be encouraged to innovate in their classroom practices as part of their professional development?

Based on one school's concerns that students needed more support in reading comprehension and our initial lesson observations which showed highly structured lessons with limited interaction between teacher and students around reading texts, we suggested a collaborative, multi-year, intervention project to encourage innovation in reading comprehension instruction. As scholars familiar with the local context, we felt that the addition of a more interactive, discussion-based strategy to the teaching repertoire would complement the strategies the teachers were already using as part of the national English Language curriculum.¹ However, the intervention would require substantial innovation on the part of the teachers in terms of their pedagogical practices. Teachers would need to innovate in terms of engaging in collegial planning, integrating new questioning techniques in their lessons, and adapting the new strategies to fit the local context. In this article, we briefly describe the intervention and the innovations - which the teachers engaged in. We then discuss the changes which occurred over time in the classroom practices along with the teachers' reflections. We conclude with our reflections, as mentors, on the process of innovation. Throughout, we refer to the 'intervention' as the process we planned and in which the teachers engaged for learning the new strategies; we refer to the 'innovation' as what the teachers did in their lessons—the ways in which they adopted and adapted the strategies presented in the intervention.

Intervention Purpose and Context

Although recent findings from PIRLS 2011 (Progress in International Reading) have shown Singapore as one of the top four countries in terms of overall achievement for reading (Mullis et al., 2012), local, observational studies (Curd-Christiansen and Silver, 2013; Silver, 2001; Wong, 2007) have shown that it is common for teachers in Singapore schools to

- follow school textbooks or other mandated materials closely, almost as a script, when teaching reading comprehension in primary schools;
- use an initiate-response-evaluate (IRE) form of questioning in lessons persistently, and
- have students read aloud and answer comprehension questions following the text as the dominant lesson activities.

During an initial period of observation at the start of this project (1 observation per teacher), we observed the prominence of these activities. On the other hand, current national educational policy aspires to enable students to develop information and communication skills as well as being confident, self-directed, active learners (Ministry of Education, 2010). Therefore, this project encouraged teachers to implement open-ended, text-centred discussion during reading comprehension lessons. Working as mentors, we introduced teachers at one local school in Singapore to the instructional strategy of Questioning-the-Author (QtA) (Beck and Mckeown, 2006) which has been used in the United States to help improve their reading skills. We also introduced

Negotiation for Meaning (NfM) as a conversational strategy based in second acquisition research, and intended to clarify misunderstandings (Pica, 1994).

Briefly, QtA assumes that authors are fallible and readers can and should question the author's presentation. 'Queries' are used by the teacher in whole-class discussion and are intended to encourage students to think about what the author might have meant, why the author might have presented information in a particular way, and whether the author was clear/less than clear. 'Follow-up moves' encourage students to expand on their ideas or find evidence to support their statements. NfM, on the other hand, is an interactional strategy intended to encourage conversational partners to work together to resolve misunderstandings or potential misunderstandings. Questions used in NfM might be broad, e.g. 'What do you mean by that?', or specific (e.g. about a vocabulary item). Van den Branden (2000), for example, used teacher-led NfM in a study of young second language readers and found it assisted comprehension.

Both strategies encourage more open-ended discussion than was typical in the lessons we observed at the participating school. Used together, we expected that the strategies could help teachers lead students through comprehension of reading passages (using QtA) and vocabulary (using NfM). Given the difference between the new strategies, the teachers' usual practices, and the requirements of the national curriculum, a critical part of the project was for the teachers to think about when and how to adopt and adapt QtA and NfM in the local context as part of their innovation efforts.

Description of the Intervention

The three-year project included an initial stage of reading and discussing of published research with mentors who also modelled the new instructional strategies. This stage was followed by the teachers collaboratively planning lessons incorporating QtA queries and follow-up moves. In the third stage, lessons were role-played with the mentors. As NfM is a reactive strategy, it was only at this stage that teachers could potentially incorporate NfM. After the role-plays, the teachers received feedback, then revised their lesson plans, and taught the lessons they had designed to their own classes of primary grade students. Lessons were video-recorded for use in post observation conversations (held one-on-one with a teacher and a mentor). The teachers were also given copies of the videos to use for independent study and reflection. These stages were repeated as the project progressed from Year 1 to Year 3, with less time for reading relevant research and more time for lesson observations and post observation conversations. Written reflections were done throughout the project with at least one at the beginning, middle and end of each of the three years.

Participants

Participation was based on teacher volunteers at one school – a mixed-gender, academically mid-range school which drew students primarily from the surrounding geographic area.² For the purpose of this article, we focus on five teachers who started in the first two years, each of whom had more than 5 years of teaching experience. They taught at grades 3, 4 or 5, with students aged 9–11. The students were primarily Singaporean, with mixed ethnicities and home languages in each class. Common home languages in Singapore include Chinese varieties (especially Mandarin), Malay, Tamil, English or a combination of these, and the student population reflected this mix. The English Head of Department at the school reported that most students came from homes in which English was not the primary language.

Intervention, Innovation and Teachers' Reflections

To discuss the results of the intervention and the teachers' innovations, we draw from the teachers' reflections and our lesson observations. For each year of the project, we present responses to reflection prompts that highlight the dominant teacher perceptions along with our comments based on the observations.

Year 1

Midway through the first year, the teachers responded to this prompt: 'In what way(s) are my teaching principles and practices different from/same as when I started this project?' All five teachers said that before the project, they had primarily asked information-retrieval questions. Eight months into the project, three out of five teachers stated that they incorporated queries as advocated for the QtA strategy. Specifically they claimed that they asked more 'initiating queries' which are designed to make public the author's ideas (e.g. What is the author trying to say here? What do you think the author wants us to know?) and 'follow-up queries' which are intended to encourage discussion of author reasons and link ideas. Lesson observations confirmed that all five teachers, while still using information-retrieval questions, also incorporated the types of queries which are key to QtA. However, the observations also showed that the teachers tended to treat prepared queries in the lesson plans as a 'script' with little variation or adaptation during lesson enactment. In this, the teachers followed their traditional practice of sticking closely to the mandated lesson materials without the sort of on-the-spot modification needed to make a QtA lesson flow well. There was little evidence of NfM, which cannot be planned into lessons as it is primarily a reactive strategy. For example, teachers might plan to use NfM if there are indications of a lack of comprehension, but teachers cannot plan exactly when/if these moments will occur. The teachers did not refer to NfM in

their reflections. Four of the five teachers seemed to recognize the need for further improvement as they commented on continuing to work on their questioning techniques and to engage students more in discussions.

Although the teachers tried to follow their own lesson plans assiduously, they did not rigidly adopt the QtA strategy and discard what they knew as useful activities for their teaching context. For example, prior to the project, two teachers typically had students circle or highlight vocabulary and grammatical items in the reading texts to prepare them for answering worksheet questions. Eight months later these teachers did the same because they felt this benefited student learning. This suggests that teachers not only innovated by applying the new strategies introduced in the intervention but also through adapting the QtA strategy in strategic ways.

Year 2

The teachers continued to make changes in the types of questions asked in class as well as sharing the floor with students more often. Their written reflections in response to this prompt, ‘Has participation in this project changed my way of teaching in lessons other than the ones with the prepared plans?’ suggested that they were continuing to innovate in their teaching in thoughtful ways. At this point, the teachers were particularly concerned with student participation, allowing time for understanding to develop through discussion, and making the lessons interesting. We share three typical examples:

Alice³: Definitely! I have given more freedom to my pupils to lead discussions and talk more instead of trying to “feed” them the answers. I have forced them to construct their own understanding through discussions. I have also moved away from finding out what the pupils don’t know, but now towards what my pupils know and how they can share this info with the rest of the class. I think it has also made lessons interesting for me and my pupils, as they get to interact with me more than just answer my questions.

Hwei Min: It is alright that not everything can be clearly explained. It is alright to throw the question back to the pupil to answer them. Get pupils to talk and question the texts, to clarify when in doubt.

Norhaida: It changed the way I question pupils, even for Maths and Science. I tried to ask more open questions and direct the questions and discussion to the pupils. I

realised that the discussions became more interesting and fruitful and the pupils are more participative.

These changes were borne out by classroom observations which showed more complete implementation of the QtA strategy in English lessons for all five teachers as well as the use of these strategies in other subjects for some teachers. For example, as in the reflection excerpts above, the teachers asked more questions and more different types of questions. The teachers were also cognizant of maintaining practices they valued. For example, one teacher continued to explain the main idea of each paragraph of the text because she knew students would be tested on determining main ideas. Another teacher continued her practice of asking pupils to summarize the main points in each paragraph because she deemed this a useful examination skill. Taken together, by the end of Year 2 we could see that the teachers had a solid knowledge of how to use QtA effectively in their lessons, including how to adapt the strategy for the needs of their particular educational system. As in Year 1, there was little evidence of use of NfM and it was mentioned only twice in the teacher reflections, both times very briefly.

Year 3

As the project was coming to a close in Year 3, the teachers were again asked to comment on ‘What have I learned so far from my participation in this project?’ At this point in the project, fewer changes in practice but more confidence was evident. As one teacher reported, she had ‘learnt to craft the lesson plans and this time more confidently. This is especially so when coming up with the main ideas for the different parts of the passages’. The teachers also made comments which suggested that they had generalized from learning to implement the strategy following a script (in Year 1), to thinking about how to use components of the strategy more flexibly. For example, these two teachers commented on changes in their use of questions in general, not merely on trying to incorporate QtA queries:

Alice: Other than learning to ask open-ended questions to invoke thinking, and how to decide on major understandings, I have also learnt to craft follow-up queries and learnt how important they are to get pupils to come to a major understanding. I have also learnt that it is okay to ask questions that check on understanding (i.e. standard comprehension questions) and still be a successful QtA lesson.

Norhaida: The way we ask questions is very important. Ask a good, open question, you'll open up a fruitful discussion ... An answer is not the end of a question. In fact it can open up a whole new world of possible discussion.

As in the previous two years, NfM was not mentioned in the reflections. Therefore, the final reflection at the end of Year 3 included a prompt 'What does "negotiation for meaning" mean to me? How does it relate to what I have been doing this year on reading comprehension?' All of the teachers gave short responses stating that NfM had to do with seeking clarification. They saw it as integral to QtA rather than a separate strategy, which was also our thinking in designing the intervention. Based on the teacher reflections and the observation, it was evident that the teachers thought more in terms of QtA (which offered a more structured approach to thinking about leading discussion) than NfM, and that teachers were able to implement their QtA lesson plans with more adaptation and more confidence year by year. Crucially, they were not completely comfortable with the intervention until they were able to feel that they could make their own innovations in the planning and delivery of lessons.

Reflections on Professional Development and Teacher Innovation

In their summary of a meta-analysis on teacher learning and standards-based education, Snow-Renner and Lauer state:

Teachers tend to teach in the way they are taught. They develop instructional repertoires that are consistent with their beliefs and attitudes about content and student learning. Often, these are firmly nested within the paradigm of teacher-centered instruction. But, if teachers are asked to shift to more student-centered ways of instruction, they also must adjust their beliefs to fit the new paradigm (2005, p. 2)

Teacher knowledge of the QtA strategy – which we feel is more student-centred than the teachers' previous practices – was clearly evident even in Year 1 when these teachers started changing their ways of questioning students and leading reading comprehension discussion. The initial changes showed us, as mentors, that a shift in the teachers' paradigm is possible if the teachers are guided and if they see value in the strategies introduced to them.

We found that the issues for the teachers were not based on their knowledge nor their beliefs in the efficacy of the new strategies, but on their perceptions of whether they could implement a new strategy successfully. We had thought the teachers would welcome the opportunity to adapt from the new strategies to fit the local context, and that adaptation would make integration easier. However,

the teachers felt more comfortable first working from scripts, then considering adaptations. We saw that taking up a teaching innovation can be unsettling even for teachers with more than five years of teaching experience as innovation requires moving from equilibrium to disequilibrium.

Using lesson observations and teacher reflections is one way to try to address the limited nature of observations on their own (see e.g. Mackey and Gass, 2005). In this professional development project, we realized that looking at the teacher reflections along with the lesson observations helped us to better understand how the teachers saw their own strengths and weaknesses, not only on what they understood about the intervention but also in what ways they felt confident, or not, in their practices. We were surprised to find that though the teachers could begin implementing the QtA strategy in Year 1 and could effectively implement it in Year 2, they still lacked confidence. Thus, the need for a longitudinal intervention was less about teacher knowledge (i.e. knowing how to implement the new strategies) but more about the teachers' self-perceptions.

Finally, we saw that though the teachers worked with multilingual students, they did not see NfM as a specific need for language learning but as an integral part of building up reading comprehension for all students. Though the English Language Head of Department had talked about the varied home language of the students, the teachers did not bring this up. They were more concerned with making the lessons 'interesting' and 'fruitful' with more students interacting, talking and asking questions – as we see in the teacher reflection excerpts. The teachers' goals were greater student engagement and improved reading comprehension regardless of home language background.

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Notes

1. Primary grade English Language has a national curriculum known as STELLAR (see <http://www.stellarliteracy.sg/>).
2. Schools in Singapore can draw students from anywhere in the city state. This is especially true of 'elite' schools or those with historical affiliations to Chinese clan associations or churches. The school in this project had no special affiliations and would be considered a 'neighbourhood' rather than an 'elite' school.
3. All names are pseudonyms.

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