Reading Strategies in High School High school students' experiences of an inclusive education approach

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate high school students' experiences of an inclusive education approach using reading strategies. This is a way of teaching focusing on understanding text on the basis of what happens before, during and after reading. A high-school grade 3 class read two short stories together and processed them in the whole class and in small groups with the reading strategies as a basis. Another aim was to investigate whether students could describe their learning about the text on a meta-cognitive level after taking part of the reading comprehension teaching including reading strategies. The results show that students experience teaching with reading strategies as an approach that engaged them. On a meta-cognitive level, students could express how their reading comprehension altered in the interaction with others and how this systematic approach to reading contributed to a learning experience that they considered transferable to other contexts.

Keywords: *reading aloud, inclusion, high school students, reading comprehension*

1. Introduction

Studies carried out on behalf of the Swedish National Agency for Education (2007), based on PIRLS (2006), show that a large part of the responsibility for learning reading and writing in grades 7-9 of secondary school is placed on the student. It has been shown that students often work alone and that the lack of explicit instruction in literature studies is a common feature in most surveys (National Agency for Education 2007). Reading instruction was thus not found to be a normal activity in the Swedish school (Lundberg & Reichenberg, 2013). Agency studies also show that learning about reading lacks a clear teaching strategy and that teachers are relatively invisible both as writers and readers for their students in class. They neither write nor read together with students, a situation which does not contribute to the latter's understanding of reading comprehension and writing as a basis for discussion but only as a basis for assessment (National Agency for Education 2007). Learning thus tends to be product-oriented rather than process-oriented (Black & Wiliam, 2009). In high school a teacher may assume that students already have the ability to read both factual and literary texts containing a relatively high degree of difficulty. Applying the study techniques for reading and processing texts, with which students are expected to be able to cope from elementary school may seem a reasonable requirement, but it looks different in reality. Apparently, most current students do not master the technique.

According to the reading strategy instruction, the goal for students is to learn to become analytical, active and thoughtful readers. The teacher's task is to create an awareness of reading and comprehension strategies, leading to the meta-cognition required to achieve learning. Reading strategy instruction should make students aware of what happens before, during and after reading. This implies students and teachers predicting together what the text will be about, asking questions about it, sorting out its ambiguities and finally summarizing it (Pressley, 2001). A joint text reading and processing approach should contribute to developing the learning of both skilled and less proficient readers, including everyone in the classroom.

Reading comprehension

Sweet and Snow (2008) presents two different aspects of reading comprehension. One is to find the author's implied meaning in the text. This requires that the reader scans the text carefully and adopts its literal meaning. At this stage, readers need to be clear about what the author conveys in the text to be able to create a text that is close to their own understanding of it. For reading comprehension this is essential, but not sufficient. A second aspect is therefore required, involving the necessity for the reader to gain a deeper understanding of what the text is about. To achieve this, readers have to interact with the text, which means not only receiving the text and the author's implied meaning, but also creating their own meaning by combining the content of the text with their own experience and knowledge. To acquire genuine comprehension, readers must therefore simultaneously stick to the content and go outside and add something new to the text. Reading comprehension thus involves interaction between text and reader. As knowledge is constructed by individuals, they must be able to discuss and keep within the information read, seen or heard. Information available in books does not constitute knowledge in itself, which occurs when the individual can evaluate, interpret and relate the information to other knowledge. Learning takes place when information is transmitted from a sender to a receiver, but the actual process is based on the individual's ability to restructure what has been read and connect it with other knowledge. Spörer, Brunstein and Kieschke, (2009) define knowledge as information that has been valued, understood and contextualized. Students cannot be passive individuals who only copy information, but they have to be active and involved and construct their own knowledge. For readers to be able to achieve a deeper understanding and not just reading the words, but also reading and understanding, they have to formulate explanations of what they read.

An important factor in reading comprehension is the ability to make inferences from what is not explicit in the text. Readers have to be able to draw conclusions with the help of their background and experience and create new information in the course of the reading. Conclusions of the type that readers draw when they create new information require a reflective capability above general text comprehension. This happens when readers' reasoning about why things happen in the text forces them to make assumptions and hypotheses. Experience and background information play a major role in that context, as well as the ability to search for new knowledge and information (Taylor, Graves & Broek, 2000). Hart and Speece (1998) and Wharton-McDonald and Swiger (2009) stress the importance of students continuing to receive instruction in reading comprehension strategies in secondary and high school, emphasizing that the ability to read different types of text with proper understanding is an "entrance ticket" to coping with university studies. As reading comprehension is not a general proficiency, but specific to the individual, it means that even students displaying good comprehension when reading fiction may not be able to automatically apply this to other types of text, or to other subjects. Students' reading comprehension has therefore to be linked to and supported by the specific school subject to which it is to be applied.

In secondary school, student tasks often involve considering and reflecting on how text contents and problems should be related to other topics and school subjects. This process entails transferring students from their own experience into the realm of other peoples' lives and cultures and further global issues. To achieve this, students need to be familiar with texts of different types to become source critical and use reading strategies deliberately. A study by Roe (2014) showed that between 80 and 90% of high-school teachers spent little or no time on reading instruction in their classes. The study also included interviews with students about their reading instruction in high school, which showed that very few students mastered the strategies of reading or had any experience of being taught reading comprehension. They were, however, able to relate to note-taking and skimmed reading techniques in conjunction with reading. Gibbons (2002) states that teaching has to be organized in order to provide tools and support structures (scaffolding) for students to manage reading on their own.

In 1984, Palincsar and Brown investigated students' own reading strategies. They designed a model based on the cognitive skills needed to become good readers and concluded that four activities are essential to

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make pupils acquire a good reading comprehension. These activities entail making summaries in their own words, asking questions, resolving ambiguities, and being able to anticipate. Summarizing in their own words means making students focus on what is important in the text. Asking questions on the text means that students practise distinguishing the essential from the inessential and become active while reading. Anticipating means that students practise predicting what a text will be about and learn to draw conclusions from what they already know in light of new information received while reading. (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Both Spörer, Brunstein and Kieschke (2009) and Pressley (2001) write about students' need to be aware that the reading process is divided into three phases: before, during and after reading. This makes for a good logical planning of the process.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to investigate high school students' perceptions of the inclusive education approach involving reading strategies by which texts are read and processed together in class. Another purpose is to investigate whether students can describe on a meta-cognitive level what they have learnt about their texts after being given the benefit of reading strategy instruction.

Research Questions

i)   How do students experience reading strategy teaching, i.e. a teaching situation with shared reading and text processing?
ii) Are students able after completing the reading strategy instruction to describe, on a meta-cognitive level, what they have learned about the texts they have read?

2.   Method

Participants and procedure

The participants (n=24) in this study involved a whole class (all students) in year three (the last year) of high school. The school was chosen because one of the authors worked there and could be available at the time of implementation. The current class was chosen by lottery since there were 5 classes in the school that could be relevant to participate in the study.

The texts chosen to be used comprised two short stories: "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway and "The Bracelet" by the Norwegian writer Cora Sandel, both in Swedish translation. The stories were distributed to all students and read aloud by the teacher before the whole class. As the objective of reading strategies is to make students into conscious and thoughtful readers who are expected to reach a proper understanding of any text, the choice of genre and text type should not affect this study. The short stories were broken up in such a way that one paragraph was read aloud and then processed in both the whole class together and in groups of students. Then the second paragraph of the story was read, followed by whole-class and group activities. After the first text was completed, the same procedure was used with the second. The students had been divided into groups and all the work was done in the classroom.

In lessons in Swedish during three weeks the class was working on these novels with the help of the reading strategy instruction. The students processed the stories together, systematically following the arrangement into before, during and after reading. After these three weeks of reading strategy, all students in the class concluded this phase by writing a short-story analysis in three parts. In the first part, students had to briefly summarize the two short stories. In the second part, they were to describe whether their thoughts about these stories had developed during the reading together and the work in groups. As the purpose of this part was meta-cognitive, it tested whether the students were able to verbalize how their understanding had been affected during the reading. In the third part they were supposed to analyze the stories from a male or a female perspective.

Interview

Two group interviews were conducted with a total of ten students divided into two groups. For this, the students were randomly selected by lottery. The interviews took about 60 minutes to complete with each group and were afterwards recorded and transcribed. The group interviews were led by the regular teacher and included the following elements: their experiences of reading aloud, the significance of the group and the structure of the reading strategies, as well as their experiences of study techniques and learning. When examining the woman's and the man's roles they were allowed to choose various starting points. They could, for example, compare the short stories with other things they had read, connect the stories to themselves, or place the stories into a larger context, such as a global perspective.

3. Result

In the result section, the students' experiences of reading aloud are reported first, followed by the significance of the group and the structure of the reading strategies, and the section concludes with the students' perception of study techniques and learning.

Reading aloud

The interviewed students described the reading aloud as a positive experience, and an advantage, because they could listen to the text while reading it. Students expressed that they became more focused and concentrated on the text and began to reflect on it earlier than they felt doing when they read silently and individually:

> *I think that otherwise you are so focused on decoding, so you sometimes can sit thinking about other things when you are supposed to read, and then get unconcentrated. You don't think about having to think at the same time but if someone else reads and you hear and can see the text simultaneously then you can really think and analyze.*

The text was found easier to adopt when reading aloud, which favored comprehension and explanation, while individual reading may involve the loss of concentration and a need to read the text several times. Students said that their distraction when reading individually and silently was partly their own fault in that they started thinking about other things when they read. They also admitted to being easily distracted in a class with students reading at different speeds and the noise in the classroom that started when quite a few of them had finished. This made students who had not managed to finish reading unfocused.

Some students expressed that reading aloud and working together on the text meant that the text became mandatory with the result that they could not "escape" the reading of it. This made some of the students feel that they "got" the text in class. There was no opportunity to "get away" or to just take home the text and read it there or at some other location in the school. Making it mandatory was perceived as an advantage for these students. The positive experience was their feeling that reading aloud enabled everybody to hear the text once and gave the groups good opportunities for discussion.

> *If the teacher had given us this handout with texts and told us to read this and then on Thursday to write a short story analysis, many would have been sitting up on Wednesday night reading, but I don't think people would have gone so deep into it as we did in the class now, because you were sort of forced to read and listen. We were forced to read in class, we had no choice and this benefited a lot of us. It's sad that it is like this, but this is how it works.*

The significance of the group

Students' general experience of the group work is that it gave a new perspective to what they read. They expressed that their first notions about events, settings and people in the text could change to some extent during work time but could also become completely altered after discussions with other students in the group. What emerges from the survey and in the interviews is that the process makes students aware that they contribute different aspects to the group and that the group is relevant to their own thoughts and experiences of what they read.

> *I think I got many new thoughts during the reading and after the reading when we discussed and we got all the new angles. I realized that you could link to several different things that were said, so I thought you developed just by talking with your mates.*

One student felt that the group discussions and the exchange of ideas not only affected the result of the story analysis but also developed the class. Expressions like "boosting each other" recur as well as the belief that the group discussions affect their approach to the texts they read. It was felt that the group opened up the thoughts, which they themselves had not previously had, and that this enriched the analysis. Feeling part of a community was stressed as something positive in comparison with reading the story at home on your own.

> *I think that the groups really raise each other. Because I felt when we sat discussing that some really gave me a boost and I thought that I could include that in my analysis. It really became an exchange of ideas. I think it developed us a lot as a class.*

The structure of the reading strategy instruction

Some students in the interviews summarize the teaching of the reading strategy by describing how it benefited their understanding of the texts. They also describe that each step was perceived as positive and made them feel that having acquired knowledge of the previous steps helped them to progress.

> *I thought it was three good steps and that all steps were needed. Before the reading you got an overview of it, during the reading you could ask questions and after the reading you could get answers to the questions. You got more understanding of the text than if you just read it.*

The value of knowing the purpose and goals of the reading was something that several students pinpointed. They argued that their reading was facilitated by their initial knowledge of what to focus on in the texts. They also claimed that it is essential for students to succeed. Students described the part where they worked with text processing in groups by summarizing the text as something that initiated new ideas and reflection in interaction with their peers. One student expressed that the processing of texts by asking questions could contribute to progression:

> *Somebody picks up something and someone else something else. If you discuss and ask questions to the texts you get a much better picture.*

Students also stated that it was difficult to make up questions about the text and said it was something they needed to be trained how to do. Their experiences of the severity of the work after the reading varied along a spectrum from very hard to very simple, as emerged during the interviews. One student said that his slow reading made it difficult to make up questions.

> *I myself am a rather slow reader and I thought it was a bit different to make up questions to the text while I was reading but I suppose that with practice it will become easier.*

Study techniques and learning

The students generally stated that the reading strategies were useful to their learning by forming a method that improved their interpretation of the texts. Many of them looked upon the method as a study technique that helped more to improve their result in the examination assignment compared to if there had been no reading strategy instruction at all.

> *I really think that it has helped everyone and that everyone in the class has got a much better result than they would have got otherwise. Otherwise you would have been sitting reading the night before and not even thought about analyzing. Now you have really analyzed, you have sat with the group, you have listened to other people's views and you have been able to form your own picture. You have really been reading. You have heard it and read it yourself. Thus you have got a much better understanding of the whole text and that really makes you better at analyzing.*

One student claimed that the joint reading process resulted in higher commitment and provided tools for learning. Self-responsibility, as expected in high school, was viewed as a problem and, according to the student, led to not receiving enough help with texts, but being mostly alone with them. Joint reading, on the other hand, was highlighted as something positive.

> *The text then becomes more of a compulsory element in school, because there are a lot of classes where you only feel sitting doing nothing, because you get so much responsibility of your own and then maybe the ability to concentrate is not on top, because there isn't much peace and quiet and then you can actually involve everybody the way you have done now in class with the short stories. It is class hours that have been used and you also get the chance to work with it at home. You get a lot of tools in school and then it is your own responsibility at home.*

4. Discussion

Several students expressed that the mandatory joint reading was the major reason why they felt that they understood the text, were able to discuss it in groups and then write an analysis of it. With the reading aloud and the obligatory work in the classroom it was impossible to "escape" the reading or to wait to read the text until coming home or sitting anywhere else than on the school premises. The mandatory aspect served in this case as a kind of motivation. One lesson that could be drawn from the study was that teachers need to believe in their teaching method, in this case reading aloud and structuring the text work. The professional teacher decides what is best for the students. This study indicates that the mandatory nature as well as the joint and place-bound situation can lead to motivation and learning. Reichenberg (2015) and Duchein and Mealy (1993) argue that there are great advantages of participating in a community around reading and that reading aloud is motivating for the students' inclination to read. Their studies have also shown that students in senior high school were favoured by having the teacher read aloud to them. This proved to help students to develop more positive attitudes to reading. Bruner's theories of identification entail that teachers can function as a model or an identification figure for their students by signaling their approach to knowledge, to the subject and to learning. Bruner (1966) calls the leaders who know more "The vicars of culture. Vygotsky too, regards the teacher as an important model. Students receive tools for acquiring knowledge by the person who knows more and through the social activities of the group. Social interaction, involving that students are spoken to, receive information and explanations, contributes to student learning. It also creates the conditions for students' reasoning skills. Social interaction is thus, parallel to education, necessary for their development.

When reading aloud, following the explicit reading instruction, teachers will also become reading role models, which, as the National Agency for Education (2007) and Reichenberg (2015) agree, are often

missing in today's schools. Students described the reading aloud as "getting" the text during class time, considering it a great advantage that all had heard the same text when it was to be discussed in groups. There is great value in ensuring that all pupils receive the same text at the same time and thus become better equipped to cope with the task. Students who are slow at reading need not experience the discomfort of the majority of students being finished when they are only halfway, as was pointed out in the study. The goal of teaching a reading strategy, of which reading aloud forms a part, is to make students into thoughtful readers. This means that readers learn to consider what they read by practising with the help of reading strategies. As for text processing, students confessed seeing this as something that they tend to "rush through", which suggests that they often read texts carelessly, perhaps only the evening before it is to be reported. Students stated that the study had provided them with tools to process the text and follow the teaching strategy, an ability that they can apply in other contexts. Teaching reading strategies has therefore entailed offering supporting structures or scaffolding, in agreement with Gibbons' (2002) hypothesis that teaching needs to be organized so as to provide tools for students to cope independently. Spörer, Brunstein and Kieschke (2009) and Palincsar and Brown (1984) are of the same opinion, maintaining that reciprocal teaching is a way of giving students the tools to enable them to master a learning situation on their own.

The teacher leads the teaching initially, but after some time students can assume their own responsibility for learning. This is in line with Gibbons' (2002) opinion that the support structures can be removed gradually. According to the students in this study, the structure of teaching reading strategies was the very aspect that students experienced as positive. According to Bråten and Samuelstuen (2004) there is no individual factor that is as important for reading comprehension as the prior knowledge that the reader brings to the text, which means that the part before the reading is important for the student to be able to assimilate the text. In the study, students expressed that they did not really think that it would have any impact on their reading, but some students described the discussions about the texts before reading as something that changed their views on the text. However, they did not mention the knowledge of text types as something that affected them. Instead, they considered that knowledge about the authors would be valuable in this context. Bråten and Samuelstuen (2004) argue that teachers need to help students to improve their knowledge and that this can be done through systematic education. Teaching reading strategy requires that students are active and construct explanations of the texts together. According to Gibbons (2002), it is the joint reasoning about what you read that leads to increased understanding among students.

Students testified that this way of working is inclusive by expressing that being taught about reading strategies was good for the whole class and that working with groups made them "boost each other." Students felt that they together broadened their view and changed their perspective partially or completely. There was a soul-searching moment when students realized that if the texts had not been processed during class, many of them would probably only have read the texts the night before the examination. They confessed to having looked upon texts as something that they would scan through, only to produce a written text to be submitted to the teacher. In other words, they had not previously regarded fiction as particularly important but rather as a necessity for understanding the task. With the joint reading of texts all had the same starting point when discussing them in groups, since they had all heard the text when it was read aloud in the classroom. This joint mandatory approach was said to have contributed to the good work performed in the groups.

The students taking part in the study expressed their understanding of the texts on a meta-cognitive level, which was noticeable in their perception of the novels when they worked in groups and asked questions to the texts. They recognized that everyone asked different kinds of questions, and they were surprised that it could be so. Students admitted to being aware that their understanding of the texts would not have been so diverse if they had not been working with the texts during class hours. According to Pressley (2001), older students are more able to control their understanding, adding that the older the students, the more important it is to refer to reading comprehension as a cognitive process. Students are mature enough

to consciously use different strategies for reading comprehension. To get a conversation going about reading comprehension as a cognitive process, text processing has to be a natural ingredient in teaching.

Conclusion and practical implications

According to the students, classes that are mandatory, joint and classroom-bound were of help to them. Sometimes, these classes actually saved them from their own lack of concentration. They formed an activity that students could not escape, as they were forced to take active part in whole-class teaching and in-group work with the texts. This study has shown that explicit and structured instruction in reading strategies has been perceived as inclusive. Students have expressed the view that, by reading aloud - the text "got" to them, which used not to happen before for those who are slow readers. When all students had heard the text it gave all of them the same starting position for discussing in groups, regardless of whether they were good or not to read. The groups and the structure involving asking questions to the text contributed to visible learning and a feeling among the students that they had acquired a new perspective on what they read with the help of each other. The students' apparent need for guidance and tools for adapting texts to achieve reading comprehension was evident in this study. Students expressed that they had previously sometimes felt being left on their own in their reading and learning. In the end, reading and literacy are about democracy, which is in line with policy documents stating that the mission is to educate active citizens. Reading should therefore be viewed from a democratic perspective, enabling all individuals to access information and to make their voices heard in society.

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