Using Book Club to Scaffold Students' Reading Comprehension: A Case Study of an American Classroom
การใช้บุกคลับ (Book Club) สอนการอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจของนักเรียน: กรณีศึกษาจากห้องเรียนในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา

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บทคัดย่อ

ในงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ ครูผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัยได้ใช้บุกคลับ (Book Club) เพื่อเป็นแนวทางการสอนการอ่านและการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนอเมริกันชั้นประถมศึกษาปีที่ 3 วัตถุประสงค์ของงานวิจัย คือ ผู้วิจัยต้องการศึกษาบทบาทและการแนะนำของครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษผ่านการอภิปรายวรรณคดีหรือ Book Club คำถามวิจัย คือ ปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างครูและนักเรียนระหว่างอภิปรายวรรณคดีเป็นอย่างไรบ้างและความสัมพันธ์นั้นๆ ช่วยให้นักเรียนเป็นผู้เรียนรู้ด้วยตัวเองอย่างไรบ้าง งานวิจัยนี้ทำขึ้นที่โรงเรียนประถมศึกษาของรัฐบาลที่ตั้งอยู่ในแถบชานเมืองของภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา วิธีการเก็บข้อมูล คือ การสังเกตการณ์ทั้งหมด 6 ครั้ง และงานเขียนย้อนทบทวนของครูและนักเรียน ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่าบทบาทของครูส่วนใหญ่จะเป็นการช่วยเหลือชี้แนะแนวทางการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษโดยผ่านการอภิปรายวรรณคดีหรือ Book Club

คำสำคัญ: การชี้แนะ บุกคลับ ห้องเรียนอเมริกัน การอ่านจับใจความ การสอนการอ่านและการเขียน

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Abstract

In this study, the teacher used "Book Club" to guide her instructional practices in a 3rd grade U.S. literacy classroom. The purpose of this study was to investigate the teacher's role and guidance in this transformation process within the context of literature discussion groups or Book Club. The research question was "What are the teacher-student interactions and how do they help students to become independent learners?" The study was conducted at a public elementary school located in the suburb of a city in the northeast, U.S.A. The main method of data collection in this study was field notes from six observations, together with teacher and students' reflections. Results showed that the teacher's role during literature discussion groups consisted primarily of providing scaffolding for students' attempts at conversation and discussion around the literature circle.

Keywords: Scaffolding, Book Club, U.S. Classroom, Reading Comprehension, Literacy Instruction

Introduction

Due to the growing importance of independent learning, attention on scaffolding is increasing. Scaffolding is defined as "the process of controlling the task elements that initially are beyond the student's capacity, so that the student can focus on and complete those elements within his or her immediate capability" (Gredler, 1997: 1-464). The term scaffold was first used by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976: 89-100). It is closely associated with another theoretical construct, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) introduced by Vygotsky (1978: 86). Vygotsky (1978: 86) defined ZPD as "the range of performance that a person can do with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other".

This study is shaped and framed by the theories of Vygotsky (1978: 1-159), and other socio-cultural theorists such as Bruner (1990: 1-32) and Mercer (1995: 1-135). From the perspective of socio-cultural theory, teaching and learning are regarded as culturally sensitive, interactive processes in which both the teacher and learner play critical roles. Rather than learning through the transmission of information, students appropriate skills and understandings through guided participation in cultural activities (Vygotsky, 1978: 1-159; Wertsch, 1991: 119-148). Thus, the development of

children's knowledge and understanding is formed by their interactions with others — both peers and adults.

Vygotsky's (1978: 1-159) notions help to explain the social nature of learning and bring to light the role of a more capable other in the learning process. Vygotsky gave much attention to the role of talk in sharing knowledge and constructing understanding. According to Vygotsky, social communication plays an essential role in development of cognition and social activity. Scaffolding, for example, is crucial to a child's development as a learner. Vygotsky's work provided an initial theoretical justification for examining teacher-student discourse.

There is continued and critical need for research that looks specifically at how teachers and learners interact as they move forward in developing shared knowledge (Mercer, 1995: 1-135). These interactions are keys to understanding the teaching and learning process, particularly the teacher's role. When teachers act as a more sophisticated other, they support or provide scaffolding for students to complete tasks they are unable to do on their own. Teachers employ particular interactional techniques that can support students as they construct understanding. The teacher is helping students to construct knowledge through his or her language and interaction with the learners (Mercer, 1995: 1-135).

Language plays a vital role within the socio-cultural perspective, most importantly allowing learners to achieve, expand and evaluate knowledge. It is this recognition of the use of language that has been the driving force for the shift in classroom instruction toward offering students opportunities for discussion and mutual learning. Mercer (1995: 1-135) argued that in the classroom a venue should be provided for students to share ideas and opinions. This is one way that students can constructively develop their own literacy skill. He defined this type of talk in which partners engage critically with each other's ideas as exploratory talk.

Studies on teacher development suggest that an effective teacher does not only scaffold student's understanding as they work to achieve particular tasks, but also acts as a discourse guide as students engage in those talks (Raphael and McMahon, 1994: 102-116; Raphael, et al., 2000). Although there are some studies exploring in particular a teacher's role as a facilitator, the specifics of the process of teacher guidance are not well understood. There is a need to further understand how language practices experienced by students in the classroom are transformed into cognitive tools and literacy practices for educational pursuits. Therefore, this study tried to investigate how the teacher and

students interact in a literature-based discussion and how these interactions help students to become independent learners. In addition, the study sought to reflect on the teacher's role and the provision of guidance in this transformation process within the context of Book Club. The research question is: "What are the teacher-student interactions and how do they help students to become independent learners?"

In this study, the focus teacher used "Book Club" to help create a conceptual framework to guide her beliefs and actions in literacy education that emphasize critical thinking, interpretation, and text comprehension. Therefore, I will give a brief explanation of how Book Club works. Book Club was first introduced in 1994 by Raphael and her colleagues at Michigan State University (Raphael, et al., 1994: 381-405) to support teachers in addressing the challenges they face in teaching. The challenges they mentioned related to diversity among students, between teachers and students, and teaching and teacher development. When using Book Club, teachers should consider three criteria: (1) they should guide students rather than direct, (2) they should address a common problem in ways that are open for students to discuss, and (3) current theory and research should be reflected in their teaching and learning of

literacy (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, and George, 2001).

The purpose of Book Club is primarily to help students engage in authentic conversations in which they share their critical responses to literature and make connections from book to book. Another purpose is to help students learn about their friends' beliefs and judgments. Students are preparing themselves to engage in this kind of conversation through reading, listening and writing in their logs (Raphael, Pardo, and Highfield, 2002: 1-304). In Book Club, students are encouraged to use their logs as thinking tools, and these tools can be helpful for the whole class. Another goal is that teachers should scaffold strategies until students are able to apply them independently.

As Raphael and her colleagues observed (Raphael and McMahon, 1994: 102-116), Book Club offers an instructional outline that focuses on mutual learning and access to age-appropriate literature for all students. Discussing text and a combination of reading, writing, and oral language can be used as powerful forms of reading activities in which difficult ideas are explored and solved by way of discussion-based responses.

Research Methodology

Participants and Classroom Context

The study was conducted at a public elementary school located in Upstate New York, U.S.A. The school drew its students from middle-class white neighborhoods. The focus of this study was a third grade reading class consisting of 15 students (7 males, 8 females), 14 of whom were Euro Americans and one was black. Their age range was from 9 to 10 years old. The teacher, Mrs. Williams (a pseudonym, a 32 - year - old Caucasian woman from a middle-class background) was in her seventh year of teaching. She was working on her master's degree in literacy education in a research-based university in the northeast. The teacher participant was representative of the national teaching cohort of predominantly European American, female and monolingual teachers (Raphael, et al., 2000).

The literacy activities within Mrs. Williams's classroom were plentiful and provided many ways in which students could respond to literature. They ranged from individual to small-and whole-group activities, including (a) reading with a partner, (b) small-group reading of literature, followed by (c) whole-class literature discussion, and (d) scheduled writing opportunities.

The focus of this study was the whole-class literature discussion group which occurred every afternoon. During the discussion, students shared their comments, opinions and questions from their logs and engaged in discussion around certain topics. The book under current discussion is Stone Fox (Gardiner, 1980: 1-79).

The story is about a ten-year-old boy named little Willy who lives with his ill grandfather. In order to save their farm, Little Willy needs five hundred dollars. He is so desperate that he risks everything on one hope: that he and his dog, Searchlight, can beat the best dogsled racers in the country—including the American Indian, Stone Fox. Stone Fox hopes to win the prize money as much as little Willy does. The story ends tragically because a hundred feet before reaching the finish line, Searchlight's heart bursts and she dies instantly.

Data Collection

Data collection and analysis took place in four main phases. Phase one involved seeking access to a research site and conducting early observations. Phases two and three included data collection, such as researcher field notes from six observations of two hours each day spread over three consecutive weeks. In addition, verbatim transcripts and additional field notes of

teacher and students reflections were produced during my visits. I wrote analytical notes as I transcribed tapes on a weekly basis, and began low-level coding. As time went on, I reviewed transcripts to identify constant and recurring practices, roles and discourse. Finally, Phase four embraced final data collection and my leave from the research site. Phase four was also the beginning of more inclusive levels of analysis. Various analytic tools and data sources helped me to have a more complex understanding of action, as well as serving as a form of triangulation.

Data Analysis

In preliminary analysis, I read field notes and transcripts of Book Club discussions, developed profiles and grouped them in logical categories. I also marked individual passages, highlighted the key ideas, and then studied the categories for thematic connections both within and between categories. To refine my analysis, I reexamined each idea unit for varieties of emerging themes and continued to refine my categories and recode data as necessary. To guard against bias, I reread the discussion transcript for additional examples and triangulated across data sources. I also analyzed data from the teacher and student reflections as well as my field notes. Besides providing additional

support for the identified themes, these data helped me extend my interpretations of the Book Club discussion. The themes that emerged were: (1) asking questions that are meaningful to students, (2) asking follow-up thought-provoking questions, (3) using students' first names to invite participation, (4) restating to check students' understanding, and (5) acknowledging and valuing students' comments.

Findings

The teacher-student interactions were carefully observed in order to answer the main research question "What are the teacher-student interactions and how do they help students to become independent learners?" Results showed that the teacher's role during the literature discussion group consisted primarily of scaffolding students' attempts at conversation and discussion around the literature. The teacher intervened in a number of ways to help students solve their problems and develop interaction skills.

1. Asking questions that are meaningful to students

The questions the teacher used served as prompts to the interpretation of the literature and inferences about its meaning. Asking questions that are meaningful to students took them deeper into the book and inspired a thoughtful conversation.

Below is the first excerpt showing how the teacher asked students sequences of questions that were meaningful to them.

> *Mrs. Williams: Now, we are going to talk about "What if". What would you do if you were little Willy? Anyone has an idea?*
>
> *Rachel: Little Willy should have known better! Searchlight is too old. She can't run that fast and that long. He should do something else.*
>
> *Mrs. Williams: So, what would you do? Imagine. What would you do if someone you love very much were sick? Does anyone have a story that is similar to this? Do you want to share?*
>
> *April: It seems to me like he has to choose, uh, between Grandpa and Searchlight. Maybe he just wants to prove that he can do it.*
>
> *Rachel: I would do something else, like selling the farm. Willy is too young to decide.*
>
> *Alison: My mom was sick last year. Everyone helped my dad to take care of me. I think little Willy needs help.*
>
> *Megan: Maybe there was no one to help!*
>
> *Jonathan: It is sad; you lose your best friend. Uh, (Pause) But in the end Willy won and his grandpa is happy again.*

> *He is very brave and uh, responsible. I don't want my grandpa to die. Although I am young, I can do something.*
>
> *Jonathan: Maybe we should think carefully before we do something.*

This excerpt demonstrates that the teacher was helping students to engage in conversation-based learning by helping them to go beyond the literal meaning to perform some kinds of analytical thinking. Now the students viewed questions in a new way. Questions prompted their learning, guided their interpretation and opened their minds to new possibilities. In this classroom context, students were given opportunities to make connections between the texts and their lives. The Book Club can help students to read text with more critical awareness because the texts themselves are connected to the students' own lives.

Furthermore, the example provided above is in line with what Mrs. Williams wrote in her reflections of using Book Club.

> *"By modeling my own reading, thinking and talking about books I hope to encourage my students to link those talks to their personal experiences. I want them to feel that their personal beliefs, opinions are valued and treasured in my class. I mean, by everyone. It will be better if they learn to connect themes, characters, and*

anything they learn form texts to their lives. I just want them to explore the world. I want them to use their personal experience to enhance their understanding".

2. Using students' first names to invite participation

The excerpt was taken from the reading and discussion of *"Stone Fox"* chapter 9.

Mike: I don't understand why Stone Fox is behind.

Rachel: What do you think April? We need your opinion.

Mrs. Williams: Yes, how about you, April?

April: Um, maybe he wanted to trick other racers, I'm not sure.

Jonathan: One person will die; at least one person will die.

Stephanie: We need your idea (turning to her friends)

Jonathan: I wonder why he is so behind, normally, he is the best.

Mrs. Williams: Why do you think so, Jonathan?

Jonathan: Maybe because he wanted to save his energy.

Marcus: Oh, yeah!

Mrs. Williams.: Ah, why do you think like that?

Mike: Maybe, he wanted to save his energy, maybe he wanted other racers to lose their energy.

Mrs. Williams: Good! Maybe, how about you April? What do you think? Does that surprise you?

April: I think that Stone Fox will win because he is professional.

Mrs. Williams: Um! Remember the question you guys are talking about: Why was Stone Fox so slow?

Stephanie: He is tricky, maybe he is saving his energy?

Mrs. Williams: How about you Mike?

Mike: Because he wanted to save his energy.

Rather than learning through the transmission of information, students appropriate skills and understanding through guided participation in cultural activities (Vygotsky, 1978: 1-159; Wertsch, 1991: 119-148). The teacher called students by their first names to draw attention to individuals, and to send them messages that they are important. By doing this, students were assured that their voices were heard and their identities were acknowledged. That is, the students not only shared knowledge and

constructed understanding through Book Club but they also shared their identity.

3. Asking follow-up thought-provoking questions

Asking follow-up thought-provoking questions that expand a line of thought was also regularly used by the teacher. She asked her students analytical questions to help them participate actively in discussion and to provide an opportunity for each of them to express their ideas and thoughts. These processes can be seen from the following excerpt.

Mrs. Williams: Now, we are going to talk about little Willy's motivation. What motivated him to enter the race? Any volunteer?

Megan: Little Willy has no choice! He just wants to try.

David: He loves his grandpa very much.

April: He is a very responsible boy.

Mrs. Williams: Very good. Yes, he loves his grandpa very much and he also loves his farm. Suppose you were little Willy, would you let someone take your farm or your house away? What would you do? Would you give up? Hum?

Class: No way! (Unanimously)

Marcus: It reminds me of my dog. My

dad wanted to take him away as a punishment. I didn't want my dad to take him away. I didn't give up. I know little Willy won't give up!

Mrs. Williams: Wow, thanks Marcus for sharing your own story! How about you class? Do you have any challenges in your own lives like Marcus did?

Marcus: It reminds me of my moving here. It was difficult at first but we managed.

Jonathan: My mom always says hard work pays off!

David: It seemed to me that little Willy did something that was really big. He is so brave.

In the context of this course, students were provided with opportunities to read engaging texts that challenged their thinking. In addition, students were offered opportunities for discussion and reflection. Such learning requires thoughtful reflection which can lead to student autonomy. This excerpt also shows that the teacher engaged in explicit instruction, modeling and coaching. The teacher's role was as a facilitator. After sharing ideas with their friends and teacher, students have the opportunity to explore the language of learning (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, and George, 2001). From this excerpt, it is clear that

the students' discussion of little Willy's motivation went well beyond the information contained in the book.

4. Restating to check students' understanding

In this excerpt, we can see that the teacher constantly restated what the students had said to check their understanding and to help them engage in the literature discussion.

Mrs. Williams: Yes there is a question why Stone Fox, who was a great racer, why did he turn out to be so slow?

Jonathan: He wanted to save his energy and when other people lose all their energy, he could win.

Mrs. Williams: Excellent! He wanted to trick people so that people wouldn't be afraid of him. If he is way back at the end of the line, people will say, oh, he is not so fast after all. Don't worry about him. They are going to have their confidence up; they start to believe that they are doing great.

Jonathan: They will slow down!

Mrs. Williams: Exactly! They will slow down! How about you? What do you think, girls?

Stephanie: They will slow down.

April: They think that Stone Fox is so slow.

Mrs. Williams: Will people be surprised that oh, Stone Fox, a person who used to be excellent, right now, he is so slow. Do you remember in the chapter eight, they were all making bets, who will be the winner, remember?

David: Yeah, they will all lose their money!

This excerpt demonstrates that the teacher guided her students by repeatedly restating what they said. This activity is aimed at stimulating a broad range of learning such as activating background knowledge and exchanging ideas among students.

5. Acknowledging and valuing students' comments

Below is an excerpt of how the teacher acknowledged and valued her students' responses.

Alison: I have a question. Why did Searchlight stop at the farmhouse?

Mrs. Williams: Oh, that is a good question to bring up! Thank you Alison! Why did she stop at the farmhouse? Do you think she should stop when she reaches the farmhouse?

Marcus: It's her house; she used to stop there because it's her home.

Mike: Yeah, it's her house, she lives there.

Mrs. Williams: Oh! Excellent! She did not need to race anymore, right? Because it's her home. She says, oh, I can stop running now as I'm home. She is not used to the real race so when she sees the farmhouse, she stops.

This example shows that literacy intervention is grounded in principles of discussion-based learning in which students' feedback is valued. The excerpt is also congruent with students' reflections. They mentioned that they were comfortable studying with Mrs. Williams because she always helped. Below is an example of Rachel's reflection on Book Club.

"I'm happy talking to Mrs. Williams. I like Book Club, no one picks on me. I feel safe here. This is my comfort zone. Mrs. Williams usually says something like excellent, good job! Yeah, I feel good when she says those things to me."

Discussions

The findings show that Mrs. Williams acted as a facilitator. That is, she coached her students while they engaged in the Book Club discussion. She offered her students an opportunity to reflect and evaluate their own learning. She created a scaffold for her students using a wide variety of instructional techniques such as responding to the students' learning needs and assuming flexible control of reading tasks. In addition, she maintained high expectations for students' performance by helping them to interact with each other according to her assessment of the students' Zones of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978: 1-159).

From the example given above, we can see that students had an opportunity to support each other through the Book Club. The findings support Vygotsky's (1978: 1-159) theory that young children learn language through social interaction with their family members, teachers and friends. That is, engaging conversation took place between the teachers and the children, and between the children themselves. The results are similar to Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development—the children can learn by receiving help from other members of society.

Before I attempt to draw conclusion about the potential of scaffolding and literacy learning, I should acknowledge some of the limitations of this study. The class I visited was a small class where there were only 15 students whose socio-economical

status (SES) was middle-high. Therefore, the results of the study might not be generalized to other students. Although limited by a sample size and results that cannot be generalized to a larger population, the implications of this study are important. The results are promising because the evidence suggests that the development of students' understanding is created by their interactions with more knowledgeable others and that students can successfully develop their own reading skill if they are provided a forum to share ideas that are meaningful to them.

I hope that the findings illustrated here will further increase ideas for scaffolding, as well as shed light on approaches in the area of reading comprehension instruction. I also hope that the examples given will provide useful suggestions about self-reliance in students' learning.

Conclusions

The study illustrates how Book Club discussions help students build bridges among themselves and learn about multiple perspectives. In other words, the Book Club can open their eyes to other students' opinions. Students are given opportunities to connect those experiences to their own lives and learn the distinctiveness of their experiences. From the study, we have seen how reading, writing and discussing about the reading selections became meaningful

classroom activities. By doing this, students, whether young or old, can develop a profound understanding of the texts they have read.

However, as experienced teachers know, creating the perfect environment of learning is easier said than done. Therefore, adopting the Book Club and using it in Thailand might be challenging to Thai teachers for the following reasons: First, a typical Thai classroom at a college level embraces approximately 45 students. How can one teacher listen, give feedback and scaffold all those 45 students in the limited time provided? Second, the nature of the Book Club discussion is student-led, whereas a Thai classroom context depends on rote memorization and a teacher-centered approach (Patareeya Wisaijorn, 2005). Consequently, a student-led discussion might not work effectively in the typical Thai classroom. Third, Thai students tend to be submissive and obedient. That is, they prefer reading for facts rather than arguing or discussing the text with their teacher (Bell, 2007: 51-68). The Book club's framework is intended to support students' ability to read, respond, and discuss literature in student-led discussion groups. Sense of ownership comes with authentic conversation about the text, students' lives and perspectives. Eliciting, encouraging and coaching students to openly express what they are thinking,

might be a potential problem for a teacher. Also, students' feedback can help teachers identify the difficulties that students come across while participating in the Book Club. How can a teacher recognize each student's level of understanding if a student does not want to talk?

Fourth, the Book Club originated in the U.S. where students use English as their native language. Thai students use English as a foreign language and therefore should be taught basic language knowledge of the text before progressing to comprehension. Expressing their ideas in Thai is difficult enough. So, how can Thai students, whose English is not their mother tongue, perform a discussion task effectively? If students do not possess sufficient basic language skills, the Book Club discussion will be of little value, simply because they may have no fundamental English skills. Fifth, Thai teachers themselves might experience discomfort stemming from their own lack of experience in the Book Club discussion. There is a question whether all Thai teachers are capable of encouraging a consistent and dynamic discussion. Also, the effect of teacher's interference or resistance in supporting the development of the Book Club is still a question.

Sixth, at present, Thai teachers are expected to teach using student-centered approaches. Yet, traditional school contexts do not fully provide the rich experience needed to teach within such approaches. The unwillingness might lead to embarrassment for teachers and students. Seventh, recently there is a shift from isolated instruction in reading, writing, speaking, and listening to integrated teaching. Also, there is a change in teachers' roles, from dictating to the class to facilitating, modeling and scaffolding. There is also a change in students' roles. That is, they are requested to take more responsibility. As a result, how can Thai teachers and students react to these changes efficiently? Eighth, there is a wide variation in classes, with students whose English proficiency is below, at, or beyond their own level. Poor students may need more help, and therefore teachers need to know how to provide instruction suitable for each student's individual needs.

The educational system definitely has an impact on students' learning. Therefore, before using the Book Club discussion in a Thai class, teachers should be aware of the mismatch of academic environment. They might need to adapt or change some instructional practices in order to accommodate the new educational setting.

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