

“AVAILL: Does it Avail itself for all teachers and all children in literacy?”



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It is often said that ‘a picture paints a thousand words.’ So what of movies? Do moving images convey a million words? What about the dialogue? It is sometimes said that the essence of a movie is in the dialogue. That is, to fully appreciate the storyline, implications, and innuendo one must pay attention to the dialogue because many clues to the story can be gleaned from it. So does watching a movie with the subtitles project the same image? It has been reported that the AVAILLL (Audio Visual Achievement in Literacy, Language and Learning) programme could assist students in Years 5 to 10 who are struggling with reading. What is the evidence for those students who are already making good progress? How important are the activities or do the subtitles themselves produce the gains in achievement and engagement?

Introduction

“Remember the times when film and videos were considered frivolous ‘extras’ in the classroom, reserved for Friday afternoons or substitute teachers?” (Denning, 2010, p. 1) Nowadays the same is not necessarily true. Indeed the use of visual technology is now seen as integral part of educational delivery. The tools available have widened the gamut of experiences which students and the population at large can be, and are exposed too. Groucho Marx once remarked *“I must say that I find television very educational. The minute somebody turns it on, I go to the library and read a book”* (Zarei, 2009, p. 66). Apart from the humour intended in the comment, the reference to television programmes as an influence in providing a possible source of language learning is substantiated in research

For example, using subtitles is an effective and proven means of acquiring English as a foreign language (Hartman 1961, Lin 2002, Zanon 2005, Yuksel & Tanriverdi 2009, Shan 2010, Talavan 2010, Kusumaradyati 2011, Qiang & Hai 2011). Talavan (2010)289) believed that the production of subtitles for selected authentic video clips, combined with the use of subtitles as a support, was a fairly novel idea with promising benefits for students learning a second language. He concluded that:

“the use of subtitling and subtitles combines a series of qualities that motivate, foster and facilitate the development of oral comprehension: it is recreational, familiar and dynamic, utilises multiple codes, and makes the achievement of this receptive skill easier, both individually and collaboratively” (p.295)

Hwang and Hunang (2011, 2) were more circumspect. Although they believed that *“television programmes and videotapes have found a place in the transmission of information and are powerful tools in promoting language teaching,”* in their study of 80 Taiwanese students enrolled in an English comprehension class they found that the reading comprehension performances of the students using captioned videos over those using non-captioned video was not significantly different. They believed that subtitled captions did not enhance overall English comprehension acquisition.

Despite this finding, most research overwhelmingly suggests that subtitles are an effective means to learn and acquire another language, especially English. The question remains as to whether the use of same language subtitles (SLS) through visual media technologies can have an impact in enhancing achievement and engagement in mainstream classroom literacy programmes?

Same language subtitling (SLS)

Minucci and Carnio (2010) in their study of 60 second and fourth grade children in Sao Paulo into their acquisition of literacy discovered a correlation between school literacy level and movie subtitle reading especially amongst the fourth grade cohort. They found there was a lesser correlation for second grade children due to the amount of schooling they had had compared to their older compatriots. They found, also that the speed of reading required to read subtitles was a complicating factor for second grade children yet the performance of fourth grade children was superior. They postulated that students at the higher grade have already established the orthographic relationships and use less the phonological routes with subsequent increase in movie subtitle reading speed and comprehension (op.cit, 229). Therefore, Minucci and Carnio (231) were able to assert *“that subtitles help children focus on the story central theme as well as its details, helping them not to be dispersed by the visual and sound effects of the programming.”*

This contention was supported by Tan et al (2007), when they reviewed the use of DVD subtitling as a teaching and learning strategy in two primary schools in Hong Kong. They concluded that *“subtitling works because it is indisputable that children love to watch movies”* (op.cit, 2). In addition they *“observed that students were more engaged in the lesson as they had to focus on the film in order to comprehend the story and answer follow-up questions”* (op.cit, 3). And finally they were enthused by the method because it dispelled the preconceived notion held by many parents and teachers *“that television and movies were a threat to their children’s academic inclination, in fact, the approach of using DVD-SLL has turned this threat into opportunity by infusing what children love in their lessons”* (op.cit, 5).

McCall and Craig (2009) investigated the impact of Same-Language-Subtitling (SLS) in a US secondary school education English and Reading classroom. Students who had received SLS experienced a two year gain in literacy levels and this was maintained in subsequent years. Compared to struggling readers who did not receive SLS, they had a higher chance of achieving at average or above levels.

The largest study into SLS was conducted by Kothari, Bandyopadhyay and Bhattacharjee (2007) in a five year study in India which looked at the impact of Same-Language-Subtitling (SLS) on two nationally telecast Hindi film song programmes. The study focused on SLS as an automatic and subconscious reading practice among over 100 million early-literates, for one hour per week. A follow-up study then highlighted the reading practice of 13,000 illiterates and semi-literates randomly drawn from five states over which the telecasts had been beamed. Their findings firmly supported those of McCall and Craig (2009), Tan et al (2007), and Kuses and Melin (2011). Kothari et al (2007, 12-13) discovered that of the

school children deemed illiterate in 2002 and based purely on school performance only 24% became good readers after 5 years of schooling yet a group which had been exposed to SLS, 56% became good readers. This longitudinal study demonstrated the potential of Same-Language-Subtitles to enhance reading achievement. The development of the AVAILLL Audio Visual Achievement in Literacy, Language and Learning (AVAILLL) as a specific literacy programme by Dr Alice Killackey in the US was based on the premise that “*using popular movies can motivate students into reading books through harmonious inputs of reading, viewing and listening simultaneously. The programme uses popular movies and subtitles in a six-week intensive instructional programme*” (Parkhill and Davey, p.1). Two pilot studies in California (Unpublished, 2004) indicated that approximately 300 secondary students in lower level science classes receiving the AVAILLL programme outperformed those in control groups by a mean average of a 1.7 year gain in reading age. The control groups continued with the usual programme literacy programme and made no change.

Several research projects in Years 5 to 10 have since been conducted in New Zealand and Australia (Parkhill, Johnson & Bates, 2011; Parkhill & Davey, 2012) and produced similar results using nationally normed measures, More recently, the studies have focussed on the patterns of achievement for the three main ethnic groups in New Zealand with Maori and Pasifika students in particular responding very favourably to the programme.

Overall a commonality had emerged between the United States and New Zealand research results regarding the effectiveness of the AVAILLL programme on struggling readers. AVAILLL So far, though, the evidence and its apparent effectiveness have been confined to primarily to schools in an urban environment.

Focus of the Study

This study will focus on the impact of AVAILLL in a rural setting. Does the AVAILLL programme lead to enhanced reading performance in struggling readers? Are boys advantaged by the programme or is there no appreciable gender difference? And finally are the students enthusiastic about the programme or is it just the attraction of watching movies in class time?

Methodology

Teachers in 11 rural schools were surveyed ranging from small country contributing schools through to large rural Year 7 to 13 High Schools. In total 21 teachers and 605 children were involved in class groupings from Year 4 to Year 10. A questionnaire was formulated involving 26 questions canvassing topics around attitudes to AVAILLL, experiences with the programme, what achievement gains were obtained from the programme, the attitudes of the students and teachers, as well as the effectiveness of using subtitles as means of enhancing reading and overall literacy performance.

The 26 questions were divided into 7 parts. In addition children were encouraged to complete an *AVAILLL Student Comment* sheet.

Table 1: Participants

	Contributing Schools	Secondary Schools	Full Primary	Total
Schools	8	2	1	11
Teachers	16	3	2	21
Children	504	66	35	605

Participants

Of the questionnaires supplied to teachers 13 responded or a 61.9% response which meant out of a possible total of 605 children, 434 (228 boys and 206 girls) were included which was a 71.7% inclusion rate.

Both regions used in the survey had Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) who were responsible for the training and encouragement of individual teachers to be involved with the AVAILLL programme. In many cases they supplied implementation support and advice as teachers made their way through the programme. In some cases teachers reported that in-class support was provided by the RTLB where the teachers were guided through the programme offering advice, helpful tips and good ways to present some of the activities. The results showed that 69% of the teachers had received formal training with AVAILLL. Thus, the RTLB's were able to supply the researcher with the names of 21 teachers who had used a range of parts to the AVAILLL programme.

Analysis and Discussion

Teacher Attitude to DVD's and Subtitles

For any new strategy or programme to be effective in lifting children's achievement as well as instilling a level of enjoyment, there must be a level of enthusiasm and open-mindedness displayed by those teaching professionals involved in the implementation and continued delivery of the new technique (Stern and Keislar, 1975; Bordbar, 2010; de Souza Barros and Elia, 1998). The initial questions in the survey focused upon teacher attitude to the AVAILLL programme before, during and after. The responses revealed that 84% were enthusiastic and intrigued before commencing the programme. This dipped to 69% while engaged in programme delivery and remained the same after its completion. From this it was possible to distil some comments which supported each level. Feelings about the programme prior commencement included comments like – "*it sounded interesting and I was keen to try something new, using subtitles sounded a fascinating thing to do.*" Other responses were – "*I was interested to see if the reading of captions focused the children's attention and improved reading fluency,*" or "*television/film as a medium for teaching reading was a curiosity.*"

When respondents were asked to convey their thoughts and opinions as they moved through the programme there were many positive comments, some included – *“impressed with the way students were involved and engaged. It provided a base for discussion about predicting and the behaviour of the characters,”* or *“I found it very intensive, enjoyed the whole class approach and the children were fully motivated and engaged.”* Conversely some negative comments appeared, for example, *“huge concerns, that is, the level of the movies, the content and the pace of the text, text not lining up with the spoken word.”*

Thoughts and feelings from the cohort about the programme after its conclusion remained the same as for those during programme delivery. Some teachers commented that – *“it engaged learners and it motivated them to improve their reading fluency. The children loved the activities and saw the learning as extremely fun!”* and *“I look forward to teaching the programme again,”* or *“So easy to use. Kids loved it! I have the lowest stream Year 7 and 8 classes before beginning the programme students had a poor attitude towards reading and I found it difficult to teach, behaviour issues also. Don’t have any of this now. Good results and motivated students.”* One respondent was so enamoured by AVAILLL that they were moved to write a private letter in which they stated *“I really love teaching the AVAILLL programme. It is a great break from the everyday group reading which at the senior end of the school can become quite drab and monotonous. The children are always enthused and excited about AVAILLL and I find many parents coming in to give positive feedback about it”* (Letter OB to AF 11 August 2011).

A crucial aspect to the programme, which tended to enhance its appeal, was the use of popular movies and their captions to engage children and hook them into reading. 85% of respondents thought the selection of DVD’s was appropriate. When pressed as to whether their attitude to the movies selected altered the way they delivered the programme, 77% said that it had no influence while 23% believed it did. As already stated teacher attitude to any new strategy was vital to its success (Reinke & Moseley, 2002; Johnson & Andrew 2005; Zimbardo & Lieppe, 1991; Cook 2002; all cited in Halawah, 2008). Conversely a negative attitude can impact upon proper implementation as stated by Amato (2004). One teacher involved in an AVAILLL training session actually turned their back while “Holes” was being used as the example movie. The author of the AVAILLL programme expects teachers to work systematically through all the activities and using the movies as intended by the creator. The movies are carefully selected to be included so teacher prejudice and opinion in terms of their content and relevance should not interfere or compromise programme delivery or its impact. Comments by some respondents supported this notion. One commented *“whether I liked a DVD or not or knew it the programme was still delivered with the same enthusiasm.”* While another stated *“the manual sets out the steps very easily and like any programme as a teacher we need to be impartial and enthusiastic.”* Yet another observed *“don’t underestimate the range of adult material many children are exposed too.”* One comment which surfaced tended to set things into perspective and support the contentions of researchers like Bordbar (2010) when they stated *“individual thoughts and opinions should not even enter it. It only taints the delivery and the children are quick to pick up on your prejudices and it can colour their response.”* These responses confirmed opinions expressed

by Reinke & Moseley, 2002; Johnson & Andrew 2005; Zimbardo & Liewe, 1991; Cook 2002; (cited in Halawah, 2008).

In terms of the way the AVAILLL programme was structured, 77% of respondents indicated that they liked and preferred the highly structured, step-by-step process with easy paced instructions. This positive attitude was based on the premise that the repetitive nature of many of the activities meant the children knew what was happening, knew how the various activities worked and what was expected of them, as well as adding predictability. Children seem to thrive best when the learning environment is predictable, has shape and pattern, and above all has clearly defined expectations and behaviours attached. According to the teachers in the survey AVAILLL fulfilled all these functions. It meant, according to one respondent, that the *“kids could take responsibility for activities without too much explanation or teacher intervention once they knew how they worked.”* Another teacher suggested that *“it made the whole programme teacher-friendly as well as it built upon the skills most children have, yet it involved them and hooked them into reading through the subtitles without the children fully realising it.”* Yet another stated that *“it was great it was super prescriptive and well planned which made it easy teaching and planning. All the ‘leg work’ had been done yet it kept the children focused.”* Finally another teacher was recorded as saying *“it involved all the elements children love – it was competitive, co-operative with a nice mix of independent, partner and group activities.”*

Levels of Achievement

Although the teachers used a variety of standardised measures there was an overall increase of 59.1%. This was lower than in other studies. While not matching the improvement in previous studies, the rural cohort result was still encouraging. It was safe to conclude that involvement in AVAILLL did add value to reading performance and did pay dividends in terms of literacy achievement with children in rural schools.

Fluency

In addition, 92% of the teachers did see visible improvement in reading fluency and comprehension of their students. Some teachers reported gains of up to 80%. While it was difficult to verify or quantify these contentions because the beliefs were based on anecdotal responses, it was safe to conclude that most teachers saw immense value in the programme. Achievement rates corroborate this contention. One respondent observed that *“children went up in their AsTTle. I believe longitudinal studies need to be done with children at some levels especially those with learning disabilities for true comparisons to be seen.”* Another teacher saw behavioural changes which confirmed improvements in achievement. They observed that *“students were able to read books with fluency having already been exposed to ‘tricky’ words and names through the movie. Being able to picture the story in their minds for retelling, using keywords and running records showed how the children had advanced.”*

In describing the gains 76.2% of the teachers noticed improvements in fluency and confidence. It is a recognised fact that having and displaying confidence aids in increasing performance in any activity. Displaying confidence is about having an awareness of one’s

ability and being able to express and apply that ability in a variety of situations. Reluctant readers often suffer from skills difficulties, hence confidence, which goes hand in hand with this, can influence significantly their ability to perform and acquire increased literacy independence.

Another teacher noted that 61% of their students made gains by being part of the programme. They observed improvements in tracking text, vocabulary acquisition and understanding as well improvements in fluency. Another respondent noted that *“tracking in all children improved and in some cases their STAR stanines improved. Also their vocabulary was extended and I saw this reflected in their writing.”* While another teacher highlighted that *“PAT results, oral discussion and their ability to use both subtitles and visual and auditory cues increased. The next time we watched a movie all wanted the subtitles on.”* Another teacher saw the AVAILLL programme as a highly motivating. She felt it was *“great for children who struggled with reading. Skills like ‘Read It-Get It’ or ‘Read It-See It’ were great. I’m going to continue to use those approaches in my reading programme to reinforce reading after the AVAILLL programme has finished.”* Again the data presented in the survey mirrored the findings of McCall and Craig (2009).

As with any innovative approach there were some concerns. Respondents were asked to evaluate the AVAILLL programme and decide if any children could be disadvantaged by it. , 61%, of the teachers highlighted that children identified as dyslexic needed support such as using reader/writers in tests, or peers to guide them through activities. Some teachers recorded that the subtitles were too quick for these children and that their ability to process the information or decode the subtitle was compromised. These children were observed as having become frustrated with the activities, their confidence was eroded because they felt they were letting their group down or they could not visualise and run a movie in their head. One teacher observed *“struggling readers couldn’t keep up.”* This project did not extrapolate out the results of slower students. This could provide the focus for another study.

Conversely, some teachers noted that children with excellent reading skills became bored with the AVAILLL process, as such the programme was deemed insufficiently challenging for these children. They noted, from the results of the testing at the end of the programme, that high achievers did not move as much as those below them or their achievement had plateaued. The researcher noted the same trend among the three separate groups he took through the AVAILLL programme over three years. The before and after results showed that 59% of the 17 children deemed to be high achievers either did not move or their achievement result was down.

Engagement

Did the children enjoy the AVAILLL programme? The key to the success of any programme or new strategy was not only teacher ‘buy in’ but more importantly ‘buy in’ of the participants (de Souza Barros et al 1998, Parkhill and Davey 2010, Routman 2003). The ability to achieve ‘buy in’ from the children is tantamount to the success of any activity

where children are involved (de Souza Barros et al 1998, Parkhill and Davey 2010, Routman 2003).

Parkhill, Johnson and Bates (2009) suggested that *“the AVAILLL programme engages students in learning; it literally ‘hooks’ them in and they desire to be involved.”* Both Parkhill and Davey (2010) enhanced this notion in their presentation to the B.E.R.A Conference in 2010 when they stated that there were *“strong links between high engagement and success in reading and motivation and enthusiasm for the programme.”* In addition, Routman (2003) talked about how effective and targeted modelling by enthusiastic teachers developed equal enthusiasm in children. They concluded that as an effective means to ‘hook’ children into the programme the teachers need to show that they are hooked in as well.

The MOE (2003) argue that *“when the teacher’s own passion shines through the literacy activities of the classroom, it affects the quality of the students learning.”* (p.11) Equally, they suggested that effective student success relied on student engagement, and that it was this engagement that led to the literacy success. They also suggested that success did not come in isolation it was, in fact, motivated by the enthusiasm of the teachers who were planning and delivering the When asked if their children were enthusiastic about the AVAILLL programme 85% of the respondents agreed. Using anecdotal observations they were able to report that *“each session the children were eager to start and ready and waiting,”* Others noted that *“they were excited when AVAILLL time was next and there were moans when we finished with comments like ‘that’s my favourite activity.’”* Another respondent noted that there were *“cheers when they realised it was reading time. There was an instant readiness to get organised and get settled for the programme to begin.”*

When students themselves were asked to rate the programme and quantify their feelings, 42% of the children believed that it was a fun way to learn while a further 31% said they ‘loved it’. Overall 81% felt that their reading and enthusiasm for reading had improved. Some put this improvement down to the programme itself and the novel way it was presented. Many said they loved the DVD’s and thought watching DVD’s instead of actually ‘reading’ was great. Little did they realise that they actually do more concentrated and concerted reading in the AVAILLL setting than in a conventional instructional reading programme. Some attributed their success to the enthusiasm of their teacher. One student said *‘Miss..... seemed to enjoy it and that made us as well.’* This, indeed clearly justifies the conclusions made by de Souza Barros et al (1998), Parkhill and Davey (2010) and Routman (2003).

Implications

Results from this study must be treated with caution due to the varying range of pre and post testing regimes in place, teacher training or lack of, and the structure and wording of the questionnaire. Although there was a wide sample of children included there was, in fact a limited teacher sample. A 61.9% teacher response to the questionnaire cannot be deemed to be a representative sample. The results for the survey did show that the AVAILLL programme does lift reading achievement both in boys and girls. What the results do not extrapolate out is the number of children struggling with literacy who were helped by the

programme. Although some teachers did mention that children deemed to be special needs in literacy, that is, those identified as dyslexic, dyspraxia or with specific literacy learning needs appeared to be disadvantaged by the programme while others felt the opposite was the case. As such there is possible a field of study focusing on how children identified as struggling with literacy could benefit from the AVAILLL programme. In addition, this study did not tease out the performance of the very capable readers.

Conclusion

Although current literacy programmes in NZ programmes are designed to meet the individual needs students, they are often delivered in a group context, arranging the children in instructional groups according to their ability. Progress is monitored regularly to determine if each child has moved to the next level. Ultimately, all these programmes, no matter what form they are manifest, rely on the instructional reading process and its associated skills and assumptions. One advantage of AVAILLL is that it is a whole class approach utilising and encouraging mutual support among the students within well-constructed and simple group activities, as well providing some a competitive element. Using popular DVD movies as the prime motivator, AVAILLL is able to hook children into a form of concentrated and concerted reading without them actually realising it. In the end the goal of AVAILLL, This study also highlighted the importance of teacher attitude in order for the programme to be effective. Teacher attitude affects how students view the programme, its content and its success. If teachers display enthusiasm for the programme this tends to rub off on the children. Anecdotal information supports this as outlined earlier. In addition, this positive attitude and enthusiasm can set how successful the students will be. Being successful contributes to improvement in achievement, enhances self-esteem and improves the way students view their literacy ability.

Enjoyment is always the key attribute that children display if they are experiencing success in anything they are involved in whether it is in the classroom or out in the playground. One key finding this study noted was that most children enjoyed the programme. They loved the competitive element and the fun activities. One would venture to assume that watching movies at school, in the name of reading, was a motivator in itself. This was noted with many of the comments made by the students. What better way to 'do reading' while watching movies.

As with any research there are limitations and this project was no exception. Its broad focus possibly affected the findings. If this research was to be emulated in the future, a narrower focus could be beneficial. One aspect which could be explored is the benefits or not of AVAILLL, on children with specific learning difficulties or perhaps explore how AVAILLL is viewed by the very competent readers in a classroom and what value they glean from its structure and content. Of course, as with any research there will be gaps to explore. The last word is best left to Parkhill and Davey (2012,). They concluded in their 2012 Queensland researching by saying "*literacy practices in schools continue to experience rapid change as a result of many factors: influences from popular cultures and new technologies, the widening gap between home and school literacies and the emergence of new kinds of multimodal texts*

and audiences. In order to acknowledge the enormous presence of media in students' lives, there needs to be an acceptance of media texts as having legitimacy in academic curriculum" (p.11).

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