

We enjoyed it and we learned at the same time!

Faye Parkhill & Ronnie Davey

'I enjoyed watching movies instead of work. The movies were fun. The good part was that you were learning at the same time and it was interesting because we all got to read subtitles and do some activities while watching a movie so it was working and having fun. I found it enjoyable watching movies while still improving my reading.'

AVAILLL is a literacy programme that uses subtitles of popular movies to increase reading mileage and enhance vocabulary and comprehension. AVAILLL stands for the Visual Achievement in Literacy, Language and Learning Programme. The key concept is the combination of image and word to foster comprehension and fluency in reading. Rather than students passively watching a film with subtitles, there are explicit literacy activities that interweave the moving image with the teaching of literacy skills. Students 'read-watch' movies and complete a range of games and activities designed to keep them on track when reading the subtitles. This provides opportunities for purposeful and focused reading.

The idea for AVAILLL was conceived in the USA by the late Dr Alice Killackey. Knowing that New Zealand has a widely acknowledged history for literacy educational research, Dr Killackey moved to Canterbury to develop AVAILLL into a literacy programme and to initiate the preliminary research. A pilot study and two other studies were carried out in Canterbury in the South Island. These studies demonstrated significant gains in comprehension and vocabulary in only six weeks for students in Years 6 and 7. Of particular importance were the students' self-reported gains in reading fluency, engagement and expressions of enjoyment. The researchers then took the opportunity to investigate the programme's effectiveness in another context by carrying out a small scale study in Queensland.

Delivered as a six-week unit, AVAILLL includes one hour of focused reading per day along with a

variety of other activities, which students carry out either individually or in pairs, groups, and teams. All activities are designed to target the key skills of reading comprehension, reading fluency, vocabulary exploration and visualisation. They require collaboration and emphasise the participatory approaches necessary to support and consolidate learning. For example:

Surprise subtitles: Encouraging rapid reading through chunking of text. When a DVD is stopped the image and subtitles are not visible. For this activity, the movie is stopped eight times and the students write down the last subtitle that they have read. As the spoken text can be slightly different from the subtitles, it is not sufficient just to listen to the movie. This activity helps to train the students to read subtitles while watching the movie and also encourages rapid reading and fluency as they must keep up with the pace of the movie. The movie is stopped at eight points and the students write the last subtitles they have read.

Next word hunt: Focused vocabulary teaching and searching for certain words. The students are asked to write down all of the words that follow a common word (e.g. 'we') for 25 minutes of the movie.

Take a dictionary to the movies: Extending word meanings. The movie is paused on a pre-planned subtitle containing a challenging word and students work in teams with a dictionary, record the meaning in context within a competitive time frame.

Fostering fluency: Providing an oral/written link and reading with phrasing and fluency. The teacher reads an extract near the end of the novel in robotic fashion. The students then read the same passage with a buddy with phrasing and fluency. This provides the link between the film and the novel.

Read it – see it: Teaching visualisation to extend comprehension and recall. Similar to Picture dictation, students are asked to recreate/retell a scene in visual images from audio-only input.

A movie's worth a hundred words: Building personal vocabulary knowledge by using contextual

support in the movie. In a team activity, students discuss with group members the meanings of challenging words. These are then shared with the class. A vocabulary chart is developed which is then used to study for a quiz at the end of the activity.

In all, the six week programme focuses on four or three to four novels and their accompanying films, using these activities in varying ways as appropriate.

The Queensland study

A Queensland school had already approached the distributor of the AVAILL materials to provide information and training for the staff. This school was located in a middle to low socioeconomic area with a roll of 816 students. Information and Communication Technology is given a high profile in the school to assist learning, with many opportunities for students to engage with a range of digital media and resources

In order to achieve a comparison of findings, the same standardised measures of comprehension and vocabulary used in the New Zealand studies were administered to all of the Year 6 and 7 students who participated in the programme. We acknowledge that reading on-screen necessitates the orchestration of sound, image, movement and words simultaneously to make meaning and that traditional reading assessments using paper-based tests do not capture different interpretations of sound and image and colour inherent in multimodal texts. There are few studies where significant gains in reading skills using traditional assessment procedures are used to measure the effectiveness of a multimodal emphasis (Bruce, 2009). Despite this, our objective with this research (and that of previous projects) was to determine whether the reading of subtitles from popular films, could increase achievement in two key areas of reading development (comprehension and vocabulary) as well as foster engagement.

The pre-test comprised measures of reading comprehension and vocabulary from the Progressive Achievement Test (PAT) 4 (Darr, McDowall, Ferral, Twist, & Watson, 2008). PAT tests are developed and standardised for New Zealand schools, and so allow teachers to determine the level of achievement of their students relative to the achievement of students

in the same level in Years 4 to 10. The revised PAT in reading includes both narrative and factual texts and assesses both literal and inferential comprehension. Each passage is approximately 100 to 300 words in length and is followed by questions that have four or five possible responses. The vocabulary test contains a question focused on a key word that is presented in bold in a short sentence. The task is to select a synonym from five possible alternatives that best represents this word. The developers claim that the words selected represent the '10,000 most frequently used word families in the English language' (Darr et al., 2008, p. 11). For the posttest we used a different version (Test 5) of the PAT tests for both vocabulary and comprehension. This avoided the familiarity influence impacting on the test results.

We chose to use a comparison of the scale scores achieved on both tests as this allows a finer grain of analysis and applies to any time of the school year. Darr, et al., (2008, p. 20) state that scale scores 'provide an excellent tool for measuring progress over time. Scale scores can be plotted and used as trajectories monitored to provide profiles of growth for both groups and individuals'. They suggest that when a time span is less than a year, an average gain in scale score is appropriate to statistically analyse achievement for a group.

How effective was the programme?

Similar to our previous studies, there was a significant difference in scale score means between the pre-test and post-test results in comprehension (Table 1).

The gain of 3.89 (n=96) in scale score was almost identical to the score in the New Zealand study of 3.49 (n=111).

Although the effect size can only be classified as an average gain (Coe, 2002) the PAT manual (Darr et al., 2008) indicates that taking in the margin of error, the normal growth for Year 7 students over 12 months is seven scale points. If one considers that a school year comprises 40 weeks, then over a six week period, this could equate to an expected increase of 1.05. A mean of 3.89 scale score gain for this period of schooling can therefore be considered to be significant. (pers. comm. NZCER, 2010)

Table 1. Year 6 and 7 Comprehension Scores

Comprehension (N=96)	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	Increase in mean	Effect size
Scale	57.33	61.21	3.89	0.35

Table 2. Year 6 and 7 Vocabulary Scores

Vocabulary (N=91)	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	Increase in mean	Effect Size
Scale Score	60.71	64.19	3.48	0.32

Vocabulary

The effect size once again represents an average gain for a student's test performance in reading (Coe, 2002). The normal growth for Year 7 students over 12 months in vocabulary is 5.1 scale points (Darr et al., 2008). Therefore, a six week period would normally equate to a 1.27 average increase. These students increased their vocabulary scores by an average of 3.48, thereby exceeding the expected gain for this period (Table 2).

Student feedback

In addition to the formalised testing, 114 students completed surveys to access student voice. A series of simple open-ended questions sought feedback on the students' overall response to the programme and their perceptions of whether they felt their reading had improved, and if so, in what ways. As has been the case in our earlier studies, responses were overwhelming positive, with over 80% expressing favourable comments. The word 'fun' occurred 58 times, with most student comments emphasising enjoyment. The next most frequent descriptors were 'interesting', 'successful', and 'challenging' and 'exciting'.

Several found the programme challenging: *'I found the programme really successful but it was very hard in some places'* and *'overall it was fun and it was trikey'* but that did not seem to detract from its enjoyment.

A similar proportion of students who were enthusiastic about the programme also reported corresponding gains in their reading as a consequence. 78.4% of students thought that their reading had improved, especially in the areas of fluency, in relation to reading speed and ease and confidence of reading. Typical comments highlighted growing confidence: *'when I read aloud I am more confident because I know I'm reading better than before'*, *'It has improved my reading because when I read it feels a lot easier to read'* and *'It has helped me read more fluently'* and *'I can read aloud faster'*

That fluency and vocabulary were the areas of most self-reported growth/development is not perhaps surprising, since the activities that accompany AVAILL are designed to foster such skills. More interesting perhaps is that the strategies

focused most on developing these skills, were also the most popular with the students. These favourite activities included *Surprise Subtitles*, an activity designed to encourage rapid reading through chunking of text, *Next word hunt*: with its emphasis on focused vocabulary teaching and *Take a dictionary to the movies*: the purpose of which is to extend word meanings. In addition to fluency and vocabulary growth, other improvements mentioned included writing, comprehension and as implied above, attitude and confidence.

Implications for practice

Literacy practices that involve talking, listening, reading and writing together are now not exclusive to print-based texts but also involve the processing of the modes of image, sound and movement in digital environments, often referred to as multimodal literacy. Newer forms of media, including the use of popular film are recognised as having great potential for constructive classroom learning (see for example, Bus and Neuman, 2009)

Very few studies have reported any student reluctance to engage with media in school. Bruce, (2009) argues that 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. 300). In an overview of studies on adolescents and media literacy, he debunks the myth that students are passive recipients of media consumption. He argues that students are active participants in media texts in much the same way as they are with printed texts and that 'visual and auditory texts offer adolescents a rich opportunity to demonstrate a wide range of reading skills' (p. 290).

Of particular note are the carefully designed activities that involve collaboration and support from the group work. King (2002) reinforces this in the following statement:

When students are provided with well-structured activities designed to promote active viewing and stimulate involvement for making the most of learning opportunities from films, there is no doubt that DVD feature films are the most stimulating and enjoyable learning material for the e-generation. (p. 520)

Although King was referring to students learning English as a foreign language, this conclusion reflects the participants' comments in this study regarding their feelings about the benefits of subtitles to increase reading skills and engagement.

AVAILL is neither a quick fix nor a replacement for other literacy practices that have been proved to be effective. The usual classroom reading programme is needed to support the programme in the remaining 34 weeks of an academic year. As teachers make more links with out-of-school literacy practices and interests, motivation and reading success are more likely to succeed. Watching DVDs is one of the most popular leisure activities for this generation of students (Wartella and Richert, 2008), therefore, it seems both timely and appropriate (given the gains reported above and in a growing number of other studies) to harness this interest and possibly assist to bridge the gap between home and school literacies.

Literacy practices in schools continue to experience rapid change as a result of many factors: influences from popular culture 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' (Bruce, 2009, p. 300).

References

- Bruce, D.L. (2009). Reading and Writing Video: Media Literacy and Adolescents. In L. Christenbury, R. Bomer & P. Smagorinsky (Eds). *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research*. (pp. 287-304). New York, NY: The Guildford Press.
- Bus, A.G. & Neuman, S.B. (2009). Introduction. In A.G. Bus & S.B. Neuman. (Eds.). *Multimedia and Literacy Development: Improving Achievement for Young Learners* (pp. 1-12). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Coe, R. (2002). *It's the Effect Size, Stupid. What effect size is and why it is important*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, University of Exeter, England, 12-14 September 2002.
- Darr, C., McDowall, S., Ferral, H., Twist, J., & Watson, V. (2008). *Progressive Achievement Test: Reading*. Wellington. NZCER Press.
- King, J. (2002). Using DVD feature films in the EFL classroom. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 15(5), 509-523.
- Parkhill, F., Johnson, J. & Bates, J. (2011). Capturing literacy learners: a reading programme using popular novels and films with subtitles. *Digital Culture and Education*, 3:2, 140-156.
- Parkhill, F., & Johnson, J. (2009). An unexpected breakthrough for rapid reading improvement: AVAILL uses movies so students read it, see it and get it. *sei: Research Information for Teachers*. No. 1, 28-34.
- Wartella, E.A. & Richert, R.A. (2008) Special audience, special concerns: Children and the media. In A.G. Bus & S.B. Newman (Eds.), *Multimedia and literacy development: Improving achievement for young learners* (pp. 15-27). New York: Taylor & Francis.



Faye Parkhill and Ronnie Davey are both Senior Lecturers in undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate English/literacy courses and supervisions at the University of Canterbury's College of Education in Christchurch, New Zealand.