'I used to read one page in two minutes and now I am reading ten': Using popular film subtitles to enhance literacy outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Not only is electronic media now totally integrated into the heart of students' lives, it is increasingly being viewed as a possible stimulus for learning in schools. A series of New Zealand studies and one in Australia indicate that, by using subtitles of popular movies and associated literacy activities, both reading achievement and engagement are enhanced, particularly for diverse and low achieving students. Same language subtitling (SLS) appears to evoke unavoidable reading mileage where reading skills are practised subconsciously (Banks, 2012).

Introduction

Learning to read and then continuing to improve and sustain reading skills involves a variety of interconnected variables, including students' attitudes to reading and motivation to read for enjoyment. The literature worldwide reports a decline in motivation and engagement in reading as students move through their schooling (Brozo, Shiel & Topping, 2007; Snow, 2002). In 2009, the NEMP (National Education Monitoring Project) report in New Zealand (Crooks, Smith & Flockton, 2009) indicated that reading was a less popular activity outside of school among Year 8 students than it was four years previously. Indeed, alternative forms of communication and entertainment have positioned 'reading for a literary experience' as a less popular leisure activity for both students and adults compared to a few decades ago (Crain, 2007).

A decade ago, Strickland and Alvermann (2004) argued that the mismatch between home and school literacies may partly explain the dips or plateau in reading ability and engagement occurring in the middle years of schooling. They suggested that some schools may be promoting 'certain normative ways of reading texts that may be disabling the very students they are trying to help' (p. 5). They, along with other researchers (e.g., Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), advocated for the use of personal and everyday literacies as 'springboards' for engagement in academic tasks. Ever-evolving technologies are influencing the rapidly changing nature of literacy and new literacies are moving too fast for solid research to determine what best practices in literacy education are (O'Brien & Dubbels, 2009). Research to support the integration of new technologies in literacy instruction in schools and elsewhere is an emerging field (Coiro, Lankshear, Knobel & Leu, 2010).

While traditional print materials have changed little over the years, with the growing presence of newer digital technologies and devices, print materials on their own are often seen as inadequate and uninteresting to young people. Dunstan and Gambrell (2009) suggest that, during adolescence in particular, where there is an increased interest in peers and social activities and often a decreased interest in school-related reading, students may begin to lose self-confidence, develop anxieties about school and even engage in activities that inhibit rather than facilitate learning. Yet even those students

who consider themselves as non-readers at school actively engage in out-of-school reading in the form of popular culture texts. Guthrie and Davis (2009) argue that, if we ignore young people's motivation to engage in out-of-school literacy practices, we 'run the risk of placing a great divide between traditional, school-related literacy and relevance to adolescents' (p. 275).

The continual challenge to motivate all students to engage and achieve in reading was the impetus behind earlier research to investigate the premise that using popular movies with subtitles in the target language (in this case English) not only enhances students' reading skills but also stimulates the engagement that is required for success as a reader (Parkhill & Johnson, 2009; Parkhill, Johnson & Bates, 2011). The common feature of reading both subtitled movies and books is an emphasis on the use of imagery; through reading-watching, the students read it, see it, and so 'get it'. According to Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003), many reluctant and low-progress readers 'see nothing' when they read because they are unable to create pictures in their mind. Continuous exposure to images on television, film, and other digital technologies provides visual representations for the viewer, unlike traditional reading comprehension tasks, where readers have to draw on their own experiences to create the internal visual images evoked in the text.

Same language subtitling (SLS)

Same language subtitling (SLS) involves the subtitling of moving image into the same language as the audio (Kothari, Pandey & Chudgar, 2004). In other words, what you hear from the audio is what you read on the screen. Known variously as Teletext Subtitles in the UK, Same Language Subtitles (SLS) in India, and Close Captioning (CC) in the US, it was first introduced to the latter with the intention of improving access to television for the hard of hearing. However, as Kothari and his colleagues (2004) demonstrated, subtitling can also be used equally effectively with students who hear well.

In an earlier study, Kothari and Takeda (2000) demonstrated that same-language subtitled song programs on Indian television were effective in raising children's reading. They found that exposure to SLS educational songs improved decoding ability in formal school settings in India. However, it was outside of the school context that the watching of television with song subtitles more than doubled the percentage of viewers who became good readers, at the same time as halving the percentage of those who remained illiterate. Following this study and capitalising on Indians' life-long passion with Bollywood film songs, Kothari and his colleagues have continued to suggest that the merger of karaoke and Bollywood have doubled the number of readers in Indian primary schools (Banks, 2012).

The Audio-Visual Achievement in Literacy, Language and Learning program (AVAILLL) is just such an example of a research-based literacy program used in formal school settings that uses a combination of image and word (subtitles) to foster comprehension and fluency in reading. The program includes explicit literacy activities that interweave acquisition of literacy skills with watching movies (on DVD), reading the subtitles on these movies, and (later) reading extracts from the novels on which the film was based. Students 'read-watch' movies and complete a range of activities and games designed to keep them focused and on track when reading the subtitles. In this way, the program therefore provides opportunities for purposeful and focused reading.

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. Each of the activities briefly described in Table 1 requires collaboration and emphasises the participatory approaches necessary to support and consolidate learning.

Table 1. AVAILLL activities

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, just listening to the movie is insufficient. 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.
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. Students work in teams with a dictionary to 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 or 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 from 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 used to study for a quiz at the end of the activity.

Multiple research projects using subtitles of popular films (AVAILLL) have been completed. These are:

- A pilot study with 240 Years 5 and 6 students in five New Zealand schools with low socio-economic rating (Parkhill & Johnson, 2009);
- An experimental study with 323 Years 7 and 8 students in six New Zealand schools, including sustainability data (Parkhill, Johnson & Bates, 2011);
- A Years 9 and 10 study with 189 low literacy achievers in five New Zealand secondary schools (Parkhill & Davey, 2012);
- A study in Queensland with 98 Years 6 and 7 students (Davey & Parkhill, 2012);
- A study in five high poverty schools in New Zealand, comprising Years 5 and 6 students from predominately Maori (65%) and Pasifika (15%) backgrounds, and included sustainability of progress data (report currently under review).

Current studies include:

- A whole school intervention of Years 7 and 8 students (approximately 900 students) conducted over two years (intervention completed in 2013).
- A study in 2014 involving several hundred middle school students from five high poverty schools in South Auckland where over 90% of the students are from Pasifika or Maori backgrounds.

In all of these studies, the Progressive Achievement Test (PAT), a standardised test of reading comprehension and vocabulary (Darr, McDowall, Ferral, Twist & Watson, 2008), was used to measure progress. Tests One to Seven were administered in accordance with the different age groups. A different form of the test for each level was used for the pre-test, post-test and sustainability assessment. 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.

Qualitative data were also analysed from questionnaires and from focus group and individual interviews with students and teachers. The quantitative data explored numerical trends in achievement in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension and the qualitative data gathered participating students' personal responses to the program. To date, we have data and results from a series of studies over five years.

The data in all of the studies showed remarkably similar trends, despite the different age groups, school SES (socio-economic status) levels and geography. The results over all the studies indicated that the AVAILLL program had a significant impact, particularly for Maori, Pasifika and low progress students. Analysis showed that statistically significant gains were recorded for both comprehension and vocabulary across all studies. Results indicated improved stanine and scale score averages well beyond those expected over six to eight weeks of schooling. Sustainability data (Parkhill, Johnson & Bates, 2011) revealed even more consolidated progress, with an overall effect size of 0.72 for comprehension and 0.34 for vocabulary.

The qualitative data from questionnaires and interviews across these studies revealed similar trends. There was a 98.8% positive reaction from the students in the program from the questionnaires. Common themes from student evaluations across all studies included their enjoyment, the belief that the program helped their reading, assisted other academic areas and engendered (renewed) interest in reading and reading subtitles in their leisure time. Typical comments from the students' written evaluations and responses in interviews included:

I didn't even realise I was reading.

It was awesome and I'm sad that we have to do lame worksheets that don't teach you anything [now].

I can understand more difficult words.

AVAILLL – it was absolutely excellent. I am speechless!

I know more words and I am more fluent.

I have because now I write down words and understand what they mean.

I've learnt that I have to read a lot more and to go over words carefully cos most words have more than one meaning.

Teachers were also uniformly enthusiastic about the program and its impact on student motivation and interest:

We all loved doing it and I'm not looking forward to going back to normal program.

I've noticed a huge increase in their vocabulary. I have five children who are the lowest of Year 5 and I've noticed this increase has been amazing for those children. They're using really interesting words.

Conclusion

Key recommendations from a recent New Zealand Education Review Office (ERO) (2012) report on priority learners suggested that school leaders need to investigate and introduce new practices known to accelerate progress and to ensure that the impact on their students is assessed accordingly. Instances where school leaders and teachers have dared to be innovative and creative in their response to 'at risk' learners are particularly highlighted (ERO, 2012).

Using media strategically, as demonstrated by the AVAILLL program, promises to provide one potential tool for teaching literacy skills and strategies that have proven to be difficult to teach for a substantial segment of the population (Van den Broek, Kendeou & White, 2009). Most children have already had extensive experience with television and digital communication technologies on entry

to school. Recent research has indicated that most successful schools work within the culture and understandings that young students bring to school (Bishop, 2010; ERO, 2012). We suggest that the use of moving image in the classroom has the potential to bridge the gap between home and school literacies, by providing meaningful learning not only in literacy but with possible spin-offs for other curriculum areas.

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