Pre-Reading Power: One Classroom’s Experience

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Abstract: Because of the Common Core State Standards there is a renewed emphasis on the importance of visual literacies in today’s classrooms. Students need prior knowledge before approaching these types of texts. This article describes the results of one 6th-grade language arts class’s engagement in pre-reading prior to viewing a theatrical performance. The study examined whether obtaining background knowledge through print can be used effectively to increase the knowledge of drama, visual literacy, and nonprint text. The study utilized an experimental control-group design; t-test results revealed that using pre-reading as a comprehension strategy is more effective than just viewing drama. In addition, factorial ANOVA results showed that the treatment did not significantly interact with reading ability or gender. Overall, this 6th-grade class’s comprehension skills were enhanced with the help of pre-reading. This study indicates that pre-reading is a powerful strategy that can build background knowledge and ultimately increase comprehension of visual literacy for all students, and it offers insight for a larger study.

Keywords: pre-reading, drama, Common Core State Standards, middle school

As a 6th-grade language arts teacher for many years, one of this article’s authors delighted in taking her classes on annual trips to a nearby performing arts venue to view theatrical performances. Because of the low socioeconomic status of the students’ families and the rural area of their small school district, it was often the first time the students ever experienced live theater. Entering the beautiful, historic venue, the students’ faces were eager and filled with excitement.

In preparing for one 6th-grade language arts class’s upcoming trip, that author pondered what effect reading about the historical topics to be viewed at the theater would have on the students’ comprehension of the drama presentation. To answer that question, she enlisted in the help of a self-contained 6th-grade language arts teacher and her class who, in a few weeks, would attend a play based on U.S. history at their local community theater. The author also contacted the theater’s touring group to learn exactly what the students would view.

Drama in the Core

Essential in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is the need to engage students in authentic texts of literary nonfiction as well as literature, which includes stories, drama, and poetry. Authentic texts are works typically encountered by students in daily life, which means that some of the material may charge one’s emotions or use language outside of the students’ typical cultural experience. Drama is an ideal tie in.

References to the arts are included in the CCSS, such as the examination and discussion of works of art including theater, music performances, and written dramas. Language arts teachers should utilize the arts as powerful tools to develop and refine skills of observation and interpretation that are a cornerstone of the CCSS (Coleman 2011). Arts advocates have emphasized the idea that visual literacy is a component of overall literacy and that responding thoughtfully and critically to a painting, film, or performance hones the same skills of analysis and interpretation that are strengthened by the close reading of a text (Zuckerman 2012; Munson 2012).

Close reading of high-quality, rigorous texts is a focus in the CCSS (McLaughlin and Overturf 2013). This does
Drama is mentioned in the CCSS 47 times; therefore, the authors of the standards must believe there is value in students experiencing drama. In addition to reading drama, there are benefits to watching drama. Viewing drama can aid in understanding and interpreting texts. It can help with knowledge about character development and dialogue. Using drama can enlighten instruction, increase student engagement, and deepen the learning. “In a safe, nurturing environment, the arts enable students to express their feelings, communicate thoughts, explore their creativity, solve problems, communicate ideas, develop a sense of community, and appreciate themselves as participants in history, tradition, and culture” (McDonald and Fisher 2006, 77). Other benefits of drama include the development of higher-order thinking skills and creative problem-solving capabilities. Additionally, drama can be motivating (Cornett 2003). How can drama be motivating? The visual arts can assist with creative skills such as imagining, investigating, constructing, and reflecting.

Twelve times in the CCSS reading standards connections are made to the comparison of the same or similar works presented in different media (College Board 2012). A common example is comparing and contrasting a drama with its equivalent. For example, RL.6.7:

**Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they “see” and “hear” when reading the text to what they perceive when they listen or watch. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010)**

While reading nonfiction, CCSS 4.7 expects 4th graders to:

interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.

The expectations for use of visual texts in the CCSS increase as students progress from lower to higher grades. (College Board 2012). In order for students to have the very best theater experience, they must comprehend what they are viewing.

**Factors Affecting Comprehension**

Research indicates that many students become less effective readers as they move through the grade levels (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010). Important elements influencing reading comprehension include students’ attitudes and interests, type of genre, background knowledge, and time for discussion and written response (Conley 2009; Guthrie and Wigfield 2000; Hollenbeck and Saternus 2013; Gambrell et al. 1996). Before they begin reading, more proficient readers typically preview text and reflect on what they know about the topic. They know their reason for reading and often generate questions, interacting with the text while reading. After reading, more capable readers typically reflect on the text, summarize the content, and, perhaps, seek additional information. Students effective at comprehension not only get the gist of the text but are also able to think thoughtfully and make personal connections as they analyze and question what they are reading, hearing, and seeing (Allington and Cunningham 2011; Guthrie et al. 1999; Schiefele et al. 2012).

**Pre-reading as a Comprehension Strategy**

Typically, pre-reading involves looking at and thinking about a text’s titles, headings, subheadings, pictures, and conclusions; however, it also encompasses all of the things readers do before reading to increase their ability to understand the material. “If you build the big picture before you start, you begin reading the text with a conceptual framework already in place. Then, when you encounter a new detail or a new bit of evidence in your reading, your mind will know what to do with it” (Austin 2010, 236). Pre-reading allows students to think about what they already know about a given topic and predict what they will read or hear (Brassel and Rainski 2008). Teachers can use pre-reading as a strategy to increase their students’ interest in text.

Background knowledge has been identified as a key ingredient for reading comprehension (Tompkins 2010). Background knowledge refers to schema, prior knowledge, or experience. Activating background knowledge is an effective pre-reading strategy to help students better understand text. As we see in this study, it can also be a helpful pre-viewing strategy. Numerous studies have confirmed the relationship between background knowledge and comprehension (Dochy, Segers, and Buehl 1999; Alexander, Kulikowich, and Schulze 1994; Schiefele and Krapp 1996).

**The Study**

The decision to embark on this project was fueled by the reality that, as a classroom teacher, even as a National Board Certified Teacher, one of this article’s authors took her 6th-grade reading students simply to see a play each year. She did not do anything to prepare them for what they would see; she felt that the occurrence itself was enough of a learning experience. In discussing this recently with her former colleagues, she realized that this is not the exception but, rather, the norm. Currently, as a teacher educator, she sees her flaws and wondered if pre-reading could be one small
step toward achieving a better understanding when students view drama.

We decided to investigate whether students who had pre-read information about the historical content of the drama performance would better understand what they viewed at the theater than students who did not pre-read information about the theatrical performance. The study followed an experimental control-group design because the researchers had the luxury of randomly assigning students to the treatment or control groups. Thirty students returned consent forms allowing them to participate in the study. Twenty-eight students were 6th-grade students. There were 29 males and 11 females. Ten students were reading below grade level, 16 were at grade level, and 4 students were above grade level. Their ages ranged from 11 to 13 years. Only 6 of the 30 students had ever attended a live theater performance. This was one reason the researchers decided to investigate whether students who had pre-read information about the historical content of the drama performance would better understand what they viewed at the theater than students who did not pre-read information about the theatrical performance.

Students were randomly assigned to the treatment or control group using a stratified random method so that the various reading levels would be equally represented across the groups. Three research questions guided the study:

1. Does the pre-reading activity significantly increase viewing comprehension among 6th-grade students?
2. Does the pre-reading activity significantly affect viewing comprehension differently for 6th-grade students at different reading levels?
3. Does the pre-reading activity significantly affect viewing comprehension differently for male and female 6th-grade students?

While we were certainly interested in examining the effects of the pre-reading treatment on viewing comprehension scores, we were especially interested in determining if the treatment interacted with reading levels and gender. More specifically, we questioned whether the pre-reading activity would be more important for low-level readers.

On the day of the performance, students in the treatment group were given 10 paragraphs of informational text about the historical drama they would actually experience an hour later at the theater. The other half of the students (the control group) were given what appeared to be the same historical passages; however, while the format of the text was the same, the passages were about people and events that were not part of the play. The students were instructed to read the text and not to talk about or discuss what they had been assigned to read. While the control group did not need any sort of pre-reading for this study, the 6th-grade teacher felt that she needed to keep work requirements fair and equal so that the students would not be upset by having to do more work. The two groups were not seated together in the theater, so they would not have an opportunity to discuss what they read.

Immediately following the drama performance, all of the teacher’s 6th-grade students completed a brief questionnaire and a 20-question fill-in-the-blank quiz. This questionnaire focused on the students’ comprehension of the play to help the researchers understand whether the pre-reading of the background information had an effect on the students’ comprehension of the drama presentation.

One of the researchers wrote the 20-question quiz, which featured knowledge, comprehension-, and application-style questions. Knowledge questions required the students to recognize and recall information, including events, people, and places. Comprehension questions asked the students to interpret, summarize, and explain what they viewed. Application questions were also included, because the students had to apply general information to a situation. The open-ended questionnaire asked about the students’ thoughts regarding the pre-reading and whether they felt it helped with their understanding of the play.

Grading the Students’ Assessments

The classroom teacher collected the students’ quizzes and questionnaires and wrote a four-digit number on the papers to categorize each student as a member of the control or treatment group so the researchers scoring the items would not know which students were in which group. She then delivered the quizzes to the researcher for grading. Next, two researchers independently scored each of the questionnaires and quizzes. Finally, they met to compare and discuss their findings.

Key Findings

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all group scores (see Table 1). A t-test of independent samples was utilized to examine treatment- and control-group differences in comprehension scores. t-test results showed that the treatment group scored significantly higher than the control group: t(28) = 2.31, p = .015, one tailed.

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Factorial ANOVA, using SPSS GLM, was conducted to examine the remaining research questions. Because of the small sample size for the above grade level reading group \((n = 4)\), these students were eliminated in the analysis addressing Research Question 2. As such, a 2 × 2 factorial ANOVA was conducted that examined comprehension scores for the treatment and control groups and the below/at grade level reading groups. Results revealed that the treatment did not significantly interact with reading ability: \(F(1, 22) = 0.23, p = .637\). The main effects of the treatment did generate significantly different comprehension scores in that students who received the treatment of the pre-reading activity had significantly higher comprehension scores: \(F(1,22) = 12.80, p = .002, \text{ partial } \eta^2 = .368\). In addition, comprehension scores significantly differed by reading level, where students who were reading at grade level scored significantly higher than those reading below grade level: \(F(1,22) = 17.13, p < .0001, \text{ partial } \eta^2 = .438\).

The final analysis examined the independent variables of the treatment and gender in relation to the comprehension scores. The 2 × 2 factorial ANOVA results revealed no significant interaction between the treatment and gender on comprehension scores: \(F(1,26) = 1.69, p = .205\). In addition, comprehension scores did not significantly differ by gender: \(F(1,26) = 0.62, p = .439\). Similar to the previous analysis, the main effects of the pre-reading activity were significant: \(F(1,26) = 5.36, p = .029, \text{ partial } \eta^2 = .171\).

**Discussion**

It is not adequate to approach literacy from only the perspective of the printed world. The CCSS offer opportunity for teachers to use the arts to help teach the literacy skills outlined by the new standards, including visual literacies. This study finds that in one 6th-grade class, students who pre-read about the content of what they saw performed on stage had a greater comprehension than those who did not pre-read about the historical events and people in the play. Overall, their comprehension skills were enhanced with the help of pre-reading as a comprehension strategy for viewing—a visual literacy. Students who participated in pre-reading about the actual content of the drama were better able to understand what was performed on stage. Interestingly, pre-reading was not a more effective treatment with below-grade-level readers. Rather, the pre-reading activity benefited all levels. Also, the pre-reading activity was not more effective with a particular gender—no differences were noted with gender.

The data analysis indicates that using pre-reading as a comprehension strategy is more effective than just viewing drama without pre-reading. Additionally, key comments on students’ questionnaires indicated that the students themselves realized the worth of pre-reading prior to viewing. For example, one 6th-grader wrote: “When I got to the theater and the play got rolling, it made sense because I knew what was going on.” Another wrote: “I wish we had been allowed to ask questions after reading. That would have helped me more than just reading.”

In addition to reading the informational text, one student’s experiences helped him comprehend. The student wrote: “Last summer we went to the National Underground Railroad Museum, so I knew some of this even before I started reading, so I don’t know if the reading really helped me much.” Much to our surprise, back in the classroom some of the control-group students asked if they could read what the treatment group read because their passages had nothing to do with the stage production and they wondered what they had missed.

Reading ability affects viewing comprehension. The students’ ability to read the pre-reading document could have impacted their ability to understand what they were viewing. This could also carry over to how well they answered the quiz questions. If students did not understand what they read in print either with the pre-reading or with the quiz questions, they may not have answered correctly. When students read, much is taken into consideration; therefore, to completely eliminate any other reading effects on the viewing comprehension, future research should examine whether listening to the information results in different quiz scores.

From this study, conducted with one class’s students, we learned that pre-reading does indeed benefit students—all students, not just low readers. One’s gender or reading ability does not matter; pre-reading is helpful for comprehension. Additionally, reading ability affects viewing comprehension.

**Significance of the Findings**

In this study, conducted with one 6th-grade class, we learned that pre-reading is powerful. The study’s findings indicate that the use of pre-reading to enhance the understanding of a drama presentation warrants continued investigation and recognition as a valid pedagogical tool. While pre-reading was effective in this instance with one class, a larger study should be conducted. We believe more review should take place, perhaps expanding the study to an entire grade level or to students from different schools.

Visual literacy is stressed in the CCSS, and students need prior knowledge to be successful when viewing drama. Something as simple as reading an informational text about the topic prior to viewing can increase students’ comprehension of the drama. Reading teachers, literacy specialists, and special education teachers might use pre-reading as a way to help build knowledge, ultimately helping readers and viewers better understand what they are seeing and hearing.

Additionally, teachers across multiple content areas might also employ pre-reading to build background
knowledge, thereby enhancing the comprehension of subject-related material, be it plays, videos, activities, or discussions. When students have a purpose for reading, it helps focus their attention and can help them learn more. Teachers can ask questions and conduct discussions not only to help focus students but to also build background knowledge, whether they are learning more about a topic through reading, viewing, or participating in other classroom activities.

Implications for Teachers

While much depends on the play itself, attending a performance can either be a magical event or a confusing one. There is much teachers can do to ensure that the experience with live theater is a good one. Pre-reading helps focus all types of readers; it allows them to think about what they already know and to predict what they will see, hear, or read. Teachers can also use pre-reading to increase their students’ interest in what they will experience.

Pre-reading is important for comprehension, especially when the students may be unfamiliar with the content to be explored. Before taking students to view live theater, see if guides are available. Many times an Internet search can discover the content, theme, main characters, and plot of the drama. Students should be told ahead of time what to expect. Viewing a recording of the performance before attending it live has benefits, including the ability to stop and conduct a discussion or to answer questions at any time. Teachers should keep in mind that it may be the first time some of their students have ever attended a theatrical performance. Knowing expectations is important.

Although it is true that the extent to which students will learn new content is dependent on factors such as the skill of the teacher, the interest of the students, and the complexity of the content, the research literature supports one compelling fact: What students already know about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to that content. Commonly, researchers and theorists refer to what a person already knows about a topic as “background knowledge.”

**Background Knowledge**

This study extends the information on background knowledge by examining whether activating background knowledge can also be used effectively with drama, which is a visual literacy not associated with printed text. Background knowledge played a role in the treatment group’s understanding of the drama. In order to comprehend, students need to draw on their background knowledge. It is very difficult for students to understand if they have little or no personal knowledge of the topic of study. Comprehension depends on readers, viewers, and listeners connecting what they already know with what the new material is about. When students have prior knowledge, they are able to draw on what they already know, which helps them confirm information and learn new ideas. Reading about what will be viewed is a pre-reading strategy that can build very important background knowledge.

**Talking about Reading**

While pre-reading about a topic prior to hearing and viewing helps build background knowledge, simply reading about a topic is not enough to develop deep comprehension, which is called for in the CCSS. Actively engaging students in talking about what they read is better than solely pre-reading. Teachers must ask good questions about the topic, facilitating a deeper comprehension for the students. When class discussions occur, teachers can make adjustments to their sharing based on what students know and what they need to know.

Students in the upper elementary grades are spending more time reading for information and for learning. Talking with others plays a vital role in helping students clarify and extend their understanding. Discussions can help students make connections to the texts, especially as they explain how they make sense of the text, and they are important sources of information for learners (Fisher and Frey 2013).

Discussions should include open-ended questions to encourage higher-level thinking. Teachers can also guide students in identifying the purpose for reading. This can be followed by students generating a list of pre-reading questions to help them obtain their reason for reading. Teachers can also use discussion webs, concept maps, and cause-and-effect charts to help the children organize the information presented to them in print or in visual ways. Using graphic organizers is a great means to teach students how to recall relevant information, organize it, and use it to assist with their thinking.

**Conclusion**

Drama is included in the CCSS. Providing even a little assistance to readers can help with comprehension. Incorporating visual literacy can provide students with authentic reasons for using their visual literacy skills and knowledge. Upper elementary students need to have interest to desire learning. Many students are interested in new opportunities and in exploring a variety of genres. Teachers should go beyond novels, articles, poetry, and the Internet and work with drama. Before viewing a play, teachers should set students up for success by at least having the children read about what they will view. Teachers should prepare students for what they will view so that the students take away a greater understanding.

Acquiring background knowledge is tied to a student’s ability to process and store content knowledge, and it can be obtained through pre-reading. Background
knowledge allows students to make connections to the text that they are reading, hearing, or viewing. When students make those connections before, during, and after they read, they are applying a critical comprehension strategy that helps them better understand what they are experiencing with either a print or a nonprint text, such a drama.

REFERENCES


