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Abstract:

A study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of a Read, Ask, Think aloud and Talk instructional program on the ability of students to comprehend text. The subjects were seven, year 5/6 students, from a Geelong School, who displayed age appropriate decoding skills but poor comprehension skills. All children received 5 hours of instruction using Guided Reading lesson structures. They were then tested. All children were then given 5 hours of targeted teaching where the RAT technique was taught to help the children acquire the ability to monitor their reading comprehension and to employ specific questioning strategies to deal with comprehension breakdowns. **R** – stands for read. Students are taught to read, the title, the text, maps, diagrams, and to see these as part of the prose. **A** – stands for ask. Students were taught to see reading as an active, not a passive process. They were involved in self generation of questions about the text before, during and after reading. Cue cards for lead words: who, where, what, why, how and when were used. A cue card “Huh?” was introduced to keep children asking questions about elements of the text they did not understand. **T** stands for think and talk. The students were taught to ask questions constantly in their head as they read. They were shown how to think and talk out loud and in their heads, about what they were reading, using questions as the stimulus for this self talk. They were provided with prompts and cue cards to support the strategy. The **RAT** strategy developed as this action research project progressed. Findings suggest that the teaching of the **RAT** strategy made a significant difference in the ability of most children to interact with and make meaning from the text. Tables and graphs of data showing pre, mid and post test results of the targeted children and the control group are included. A detailed explanation of the Targeted teaching lessons and the **RAT** strategy are contained in the Appendices. The instructional program could be modified for use with guided reading groups within the classroom context.

Introduction:

Many students at the upper primary level can adequately decode text but experience difficulty with comprehension. Reading comprehension is the process of gaining meaning from text, which is the purpose of reading. The act of comprehending text involves a *person's ability to know and use strategies before, during and after reading to successfully understand what is being read.* (CLD INFOSHEETS 2003)

Students need to interact with text in order to construct meaning. *As adult readers, we question all the time, often without even thinking about it.* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000) Students, who do not question as they read, do not interact effectively with the text and therefore do not construct meaning. This leads to difficulties in both the literal and inferential comprehension of text. *When students ask questions and search for answers, we know that they are monitoring comprehension and interacting with text to construct meaning.* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000)

The advent of the Early Years teaching programs such as CLaSS and intervention programs such as Reading Recovery, has seen the emphasis being placed on improving the reading skills of 5 – 7 year olds. Analysis of results at a school based level, show a marked improvement in students' decoding skills across the junior years. This decoding knowledge is carried forward through the middle and upper levels of the school; however my experience in teaching children in the upper primary school, over the past eight years, shows that while decoding skills have improved, there are a group of children who experience significant comprehension difficulties in the middle and upper primary years, that is to say that for these students there is a significant difference between oral reading accuracy and their reading comprehension. It was with this group in mind that this study was undertaken. Students who have comprehension difficulties are often not active participants in the reading process. Reading for them is a mechanical process i.e. getting the words out correctly. For many students the emphasis has been placed on decoding with the result that they merely "bark at print" rather than read for meaning.

Research shows that reading is a physical, cognitive and metacognitive process. (Taraban 1995) The physical component of reading is easy to identify as being connected with the eye and the coordination of components therein. The cognitive processes involves a more complex set of considerations e.g. encoding, decoding individual words, and attending to various cues such as punctuation. In this action research project emphasis is placed on the metacognitive processes and strategies, such as generating questions about text, monitoring for comprehension and implementing fix up strategies when comprehension breaks down. Students with comprehension difficulties have been found to be less skilled at answering questions about the text they had read and are poor at using the context to facilitate reading comprehension. Children with reading comprehension problems had difficulty formulating main ideas, summaries, and making inferences. (Wise & Snyder 2001) Many researchers have put forward possible reasons for this. Barton, Freeman, Lewis & Thompson, (2001), contend that an over crowded curriculum has left little time for focus on reflection and the teaching of strategies rather than isolated skills. Harvey (2001) suggests that one way teachers can improve students' reading

comprehension is to teach them to think while reading. This involves getting students to generate questions before, during and after reading, teaching them to think out aloud and to carry on an inner conversation about what they are reading. Students need to constantly ask questions to monitor their understanding of the text. A think aloud instructional program was developed by Buamann (1998) to help students acquire the ability to monitor their reading comprehension and to employ various strategies to deal with comprehension breakdowns. The think aloud aspect of this program has been used in this action research project. Charmello (1993) found that the self questioning prediction strategy made a positive but not significant difference in improving comprehension. The aim of this study is to expand on previous research and measure the effectiveness in improving student's reading comprehension, of questioning, as a cognitive strategy, combined with "talk out loud" and "self talk" strategies. For the purposes of this paper, this will be called the **RAT** technique.

Prediction

Explicitly teaching year 5/6 students who have reading comprehension difficulties, to ask questions about text, and to think out loud and carry on an internal conversation based on these questions while interacting with text, will improve their level of reading comprehension.

Method

Design

This study uses a case study OOXOO design, in which the gain in reading comprehension, following explicit teaching of the Read, Ask, Talk (R.A.T.) technique, is monitored for year 5/6 students who have reading comprehension difficulties.

Participants

This study was conducted in a school of 200 children in a central suburb of Geelong, Victoria. The research design called for year five and six children aged ten to twelve. The class from which children were selected is one of three classes of year five and six children at Our Lady's Primary School in Manifold Heights, Geelong. From this class seven children were chosen to participate in the targeted group. These children were chosen on the basis of previous assessments which showed that they had good decoding skills but poor comprehension skills. They are part of a multiage classroom and make up the bottom guided reading group. The class teacher has expressed concern regarding the gap between the students' decoding ability and comprehension ability. At this level an inquiry approach to learning is used in the classroom. The targeted students are having difficulty making meaning from the more complicated texts presented as part of this approach.

The seven targeted children are as follows:

Student 1 – Male, aged 10, year 5.

Student 2– Male aged 11, year 6.

Student 3 - Female, aged 10, year 5, Italian Background.

Student 4 – Female, aged 12, year 6.

Student 5 – Female, aged 10, year 5.

Student 6 - Female, aged 10, year 5.

Student 7 – Female, aged 11, year 5, Vietnamese Background

Children 3 & 7 speak English in the home but are orally fluent in their second language.

Procedure

As part of Our Lady's School assessment timetable, these students had completed comprehension tests in February, and July 2003. The test used was the TORCH test. (Mossenman, Hill & Masters. 1987) Out of the 25 children in the class, these seven children consistently gained the lowest rankings. The July test was used as the starting point and pre – test.

Each student, on entering this action research project was assessed using the PROBE reading assessment (Parkin C, Parkin C, & Pool B. 2002) The selected students were withdrawn from class and the researcher administered, PROBE Oral Reading Observation and Reading Comprehension Test - set 11, THOMAS. This was administered on an individual basis. This passage was chosen as it was age appropriate and could be easily decoded by the children in the target group. .

Following this testing, the selected seven students were withdrawn for 10 guided reading lessons, over a three week period. These lessons followed the normal classroom procedure for guided reading with no specific teaching of the metacognitive questioning strategy, R.A.T. (See Appendix A for an outline of a Guided Reading Session)

Teacher observation of the entry behaviour of the children during these sessions showed that the students, in general, did not re-read. They did not ask for clarification of concepts or vocabulary and mumbled or skipped unknown words during oral reading. They were hesitant, giving brief verbal answers or comments. They were unable to answer questions above the literal and their body language indicated their lack of confidence during the reading sessions. They indicated that they knew they lagged behind their peers in the reading area. Children 3 & 6 were reluctant to be withdrawn from the class. The other children were eager to be withdrawn so that they could get the help they knew they needed.

The students were retested at the end of the three week period in order to ascertain any gains attributable directly to variables such as increase in self efficacy due to more individualized attention or a quieter working environment. The PROBE Reading Comprehension Test – set 11, DOGS was used. Again this was administered on an individual basis. The TORCH Test CATS was also administered to the target group following these guided reading sessions.

Targeted Teaching Sessions

The students were withdrawn from the classroom during the two hour English block for 30 minutes a day, four days a week. This provided a total of 12 sessions. Two of these sessions were used for assessment purposes leaving ten teaching sessions in all.

Each lesson had four phases: An introduction consisting of an overview or review and verbal explanation of the strategy; a teacher modeling segment; a guided application segment; an independent practice segment; and a peer sharing time (Celebration of learning).

A detailed outline of these sessions can be viewed in Appendix B

At the end of the targeted teaching sessions, the children were again tested using the Probe Reading Comprehension test – set 11 Thomas and the TORCH Test “The bear who liked hugging people.

As the whole class group had been tested using the TORCH test –in July, it was decided to administer the TORCH test, “The bear who liked hugging people” to the whole class group. This provided data on the whole class, including the targeted children, prior to and following the intervention strategy. It was also decided to administer the PROBE reading comprehension test – set 11 Thomas to the whole class in order to gain additional information as to where the targeted children’ ranked in comparison to their peers, who had not been instructed in the use of the RAT technique.

An additional testing session was conducted three weeks after the end of the targeted teaching lessons, in order to ascertain whether the gains made by the targeted students had been maintained over time.

Materials

Materials used included the following:

Formal assessment and evaluation of students;

- Mossemon, Hill & Masters(1987) Test of Reading Comprehension. TORCH
- Parkin C, Parkin C, & Pool B. (2002) *PROBE reading assessment*.

Informal assessment and evaluation of students;

- Teacher observation of students' answers to verbal questions at varying levels in the questioning taxonomy
- Students' written answers
- Discussion between students
- Use of post it notes as the students read.
- Tape recordings
- Observation of students' as they read.

Teaching Sessions;

- Question cue cards – who, what, why, where, how, when, which, huh!.
- Blank tapes
- Tape recorder
- Pencils
- Paper
- Question matrix
- PM Benchmark reading passages
- Quiet room – tables chairs
- White board
- Post – it notes
- Multiple copies of articles, books.

Interventions

- Teaching self questioning
In this approach the students will be taught to generate questions about the text, before, during and after reading. These questions will be generated out aloud initially moving to internalisation of the questioning process so that when the children read text, they formulate questions automatically inside their heads.
- Focused teaching
In this approach the teaching focuses on teaching students specific strategies to help them generate questions in order to clarify the meaning of the text. Specific teaching of the R.A.T. technique occurs . (Read, ask, Talk/Think in your head.)
- Positive feedback
In this approach the teacher positively cues the students when they apply the strategy correctly, saying exactly what they did. E.g. Good readers ask themselves questions like that. That was a great *who* question.
- Self Talk
In this approach the students were verbalizing what they would do, what they were doing and what they had done as they worked on text. They talked to themselves about the questions they had generated and the answers to those questions.

Findings and discussion

Results

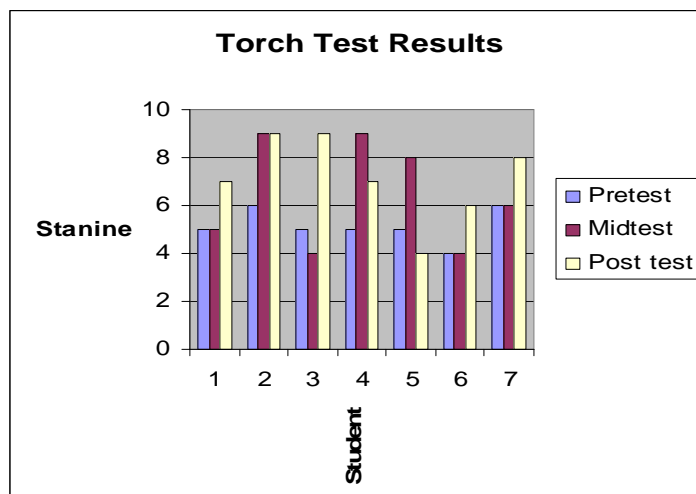
Graph 1 shows the results of the Torch Tests given to the targeted group of students. The pre-test was given in July. The mid test was given after the targeted students had been withdrawn for 10 Guided Reading sessions and the post test was given after the students had been withdrawn for a further 10 targeted teaching lessons.

Students 1, 6 & 7 showed no improvement in reading comprehension on this test after being withdrawn from the classroom and participating in 10 guided reading sessions. (Mid test) These same students showed a marked improvement after participating in the 10 targeted teaching lessons. (Post Test) Student 1 went from stanine 5 to 7. Student 6 went from stanine 4 to 6 and student 7 went from stanine 6 to 8. Student 3 went down a stanine after the guided teaching lessons but showed a huge gain, going from stanine 4 to 9 after the targeted teaching lessons.

Student 2, 4 & 5 showed significant gains in comprehension following withdrawal for guided teaching lessons. (mid Test) Student 2 maintained these gains following targeted teaching lessons while students 4 & 5 went down significantly following targeted teaching lessons. (Post Test) It should be noted that with the exception of student 5, all students have shown an overall gain at the end of the project. Student 5 missed several targeted teaching sessions and this could account for the inconsistency of this student's results.

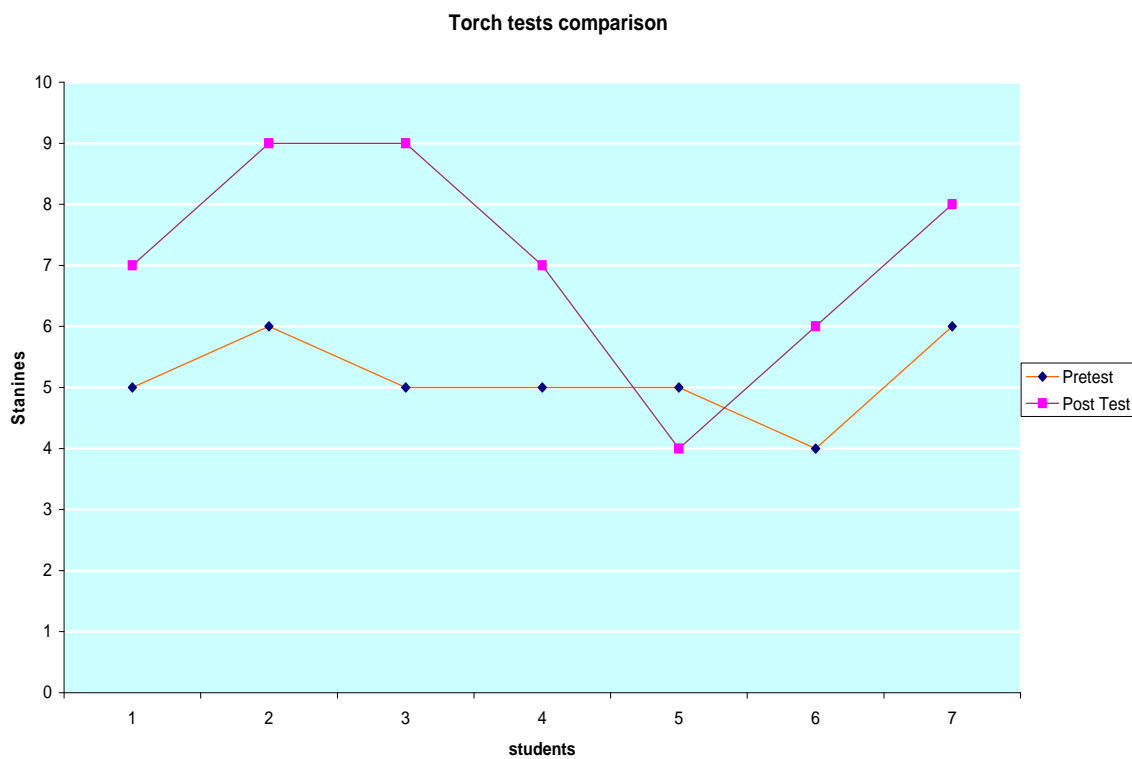
This data suggests that for 4 out of the 7 students, the targeted teaching sessions were responsible for the improvement in reading comprehension. The other three students gained significantly from the guided reading sessions suggesting that withdrawal from the normal classroom situation was the major contributing factor in the improvements made. This could be attributed to a quieter working environment, a building of self efficacy, or the fact that with closer teacher supervision the students attended more closely to the tasks.

Graph 1



Graph 2, shows the comparison of pre and post Torch results. The gains are considerable for all students with the exception of student 5, who missed several targeted teaching sessions.

Graph 2

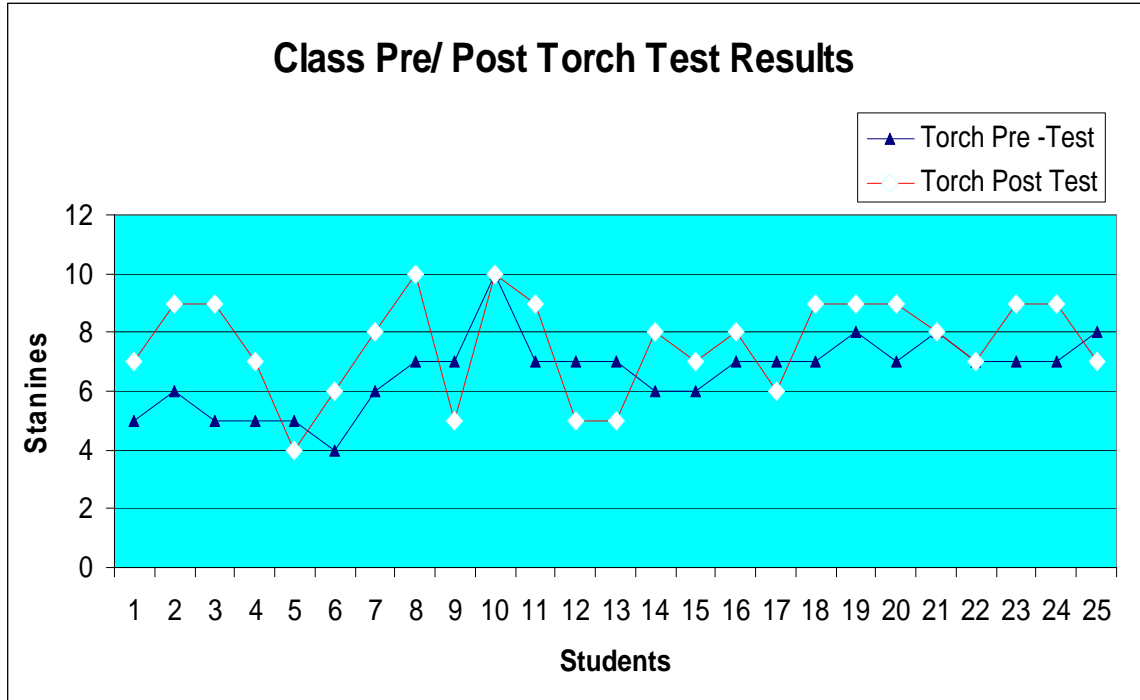


Graph 3 shows the comparison of Pre and Post Torch Test Results for all students in the 5/6 class from which the targeted students were drawn. The targeted students are student numbers 1 – 7. This graph shows that on the Pre – Test the targeted students performed below students in the control group. Post Test results clearly demonstrate that with the exception of student 5, the targeted students are performing as well, or better than students in the control group. This suggests that 6 of the 7 students have made considerable gains in reading comprehension as a result of the intervention strategy.

Out of 25 students in the class, Post Test Results show;

- Student 1 scored equal to or better than 10 students.
- Student 2 scored equal to or better than 22 students.
- Student 3 scored equal to or better than 22 children.
- Student 4 scored equal to or better than 10 children.
- Student 5 scored equal to or better than 0 children.
- Student 6 scored equal to or better than 5 children.
- Student 7 scored equal to or better than 14 children.

Graph 3

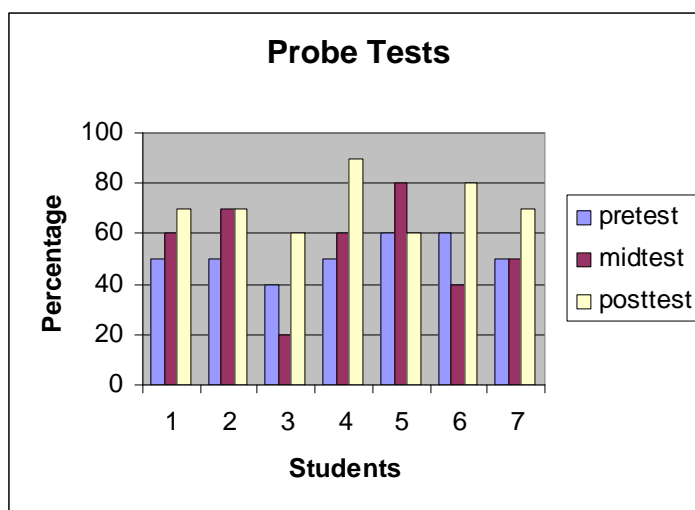


Graph 4, shows student results using the Probe comprehension tests. The tests were selected for age appropriateness. The pretest was a fiction text, administered at the beginning of the project. The mid test was a non-fiction text and was administered after the targeted students had been withdrawn for 10 guided reading sessions. The post test was a fiction text, administered after the targeted students had completed 10 targeted teaching sessions. In retrospect, the fact that the texts were of different genre may have skewed the results but the researcher was concerned with giving tests that were age appropriate so that comparisons could be made.

Students 1, 2, 4 & 5, showed a gain in reading comprehension following withdrawal for guided reading sessions. The possible reasons for such a gain have been discussed above. Student 7 showed no change and students 6 & 3 scored less highly following withdrawal for guided reading sessions. Anecdotal Records show that students 6 & 3 were not positive about being withdrawn in the initial stages of the project. This could have contributed to these results.

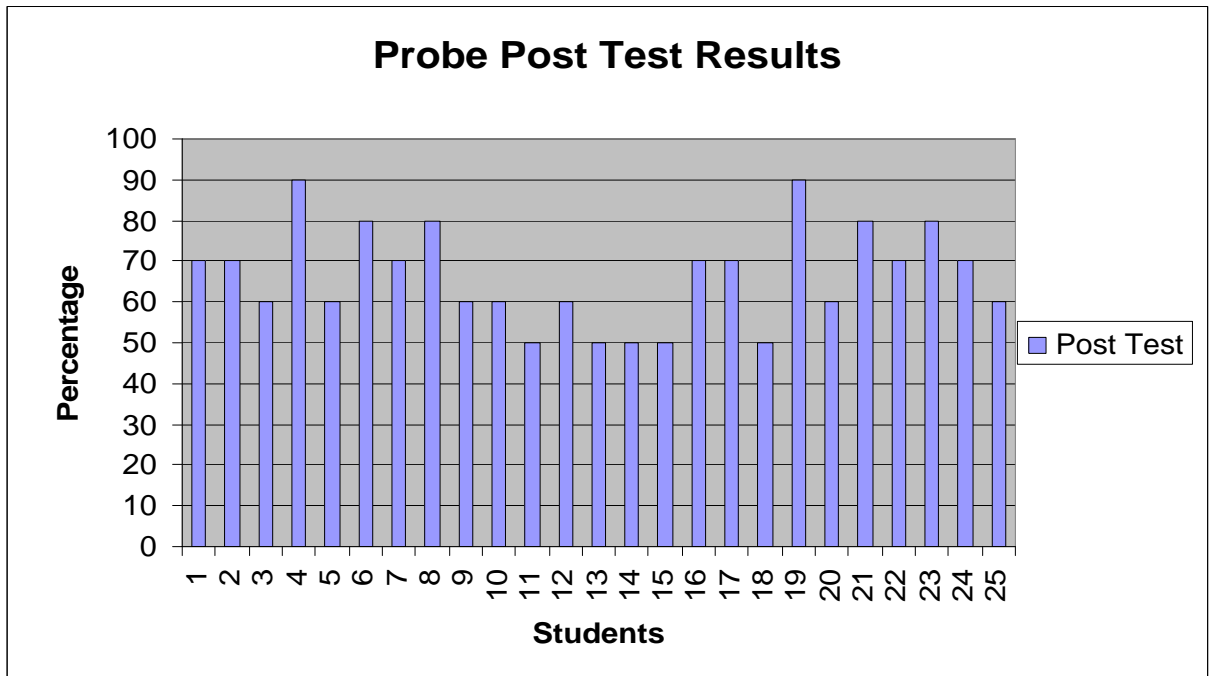
The post test results show that students 1,3,4,6 & 7 all showed further gains in reading comprehension, following targeted teaching sessions. Student 2 maintained gains made after guided reading sessions. Student 5 showed a significant decline in reading following targeted teaching sessions. This student did not retain gains made after guided reading sessions and this student's final results were the same as they were prior to beginning this action research project. As mentioned earlier this student missed 4 of the 10 targeted teaching sessions due to ill health. This could account for these results.

Graph 4



No Probe pre test was administered to the class control group. A Probe post test was administered to the class control group. The results are shown on graph 5. The targeted students are numbered 1 - 7

Graph 5



This data shows that on the Probe Post Test, the targeted students performed very well compared to their class peers.

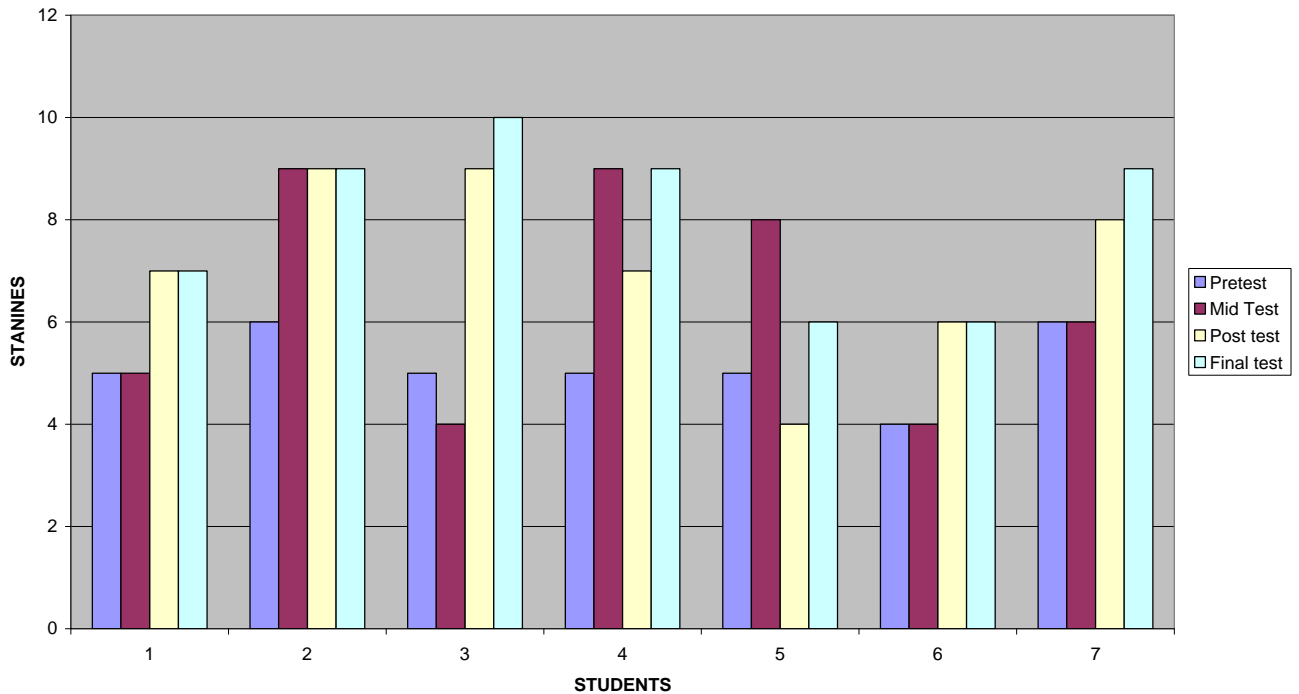
Out of the 25 students in the class

- Student 1 scored equal to or better than 18 students
- Student 2 scored equal to or better than 18 students
- Student 3 scored equal to or better than 12 students
- Student 4 scored equal to or better than 24 students
- Student 5 scored equal to or better than 12 students
- Student 6 scored equal to or better than 22 students
- Student 7 scored equal to or better than 18 students

The final test administered was the TORCH reading comprehension test. This was administered to the targeted students following 2 weeks holiday from school. The researcher wanted to ascertain whether the students would maintained gains once instruction had ceased.

Graph 6

TORCH COMPREHENSION TEST RESULTS



The data in graph 6 shows that all children maintained gains. The individual student scores reinforce previous results. The RAT targeted teaching sessions have made a significant difference to students 1, 3, 6, & 7. Anecdotal records of interviews with these students following the final test show that they are using the RAT technique in their work with texts across subject areas. The final test shows they have maintained the gains.

Student 2, 4, & 5 showed comprehension improvement following the guided reading lessons in a withdrawal situation. Students 2, 4, & 5 are also using the RAT technique in their work with texts across subject areas. They have also maintained their gains. It is difficult to say which method accounts for their continuing improvement in reading comprehension. Reading comprehension improvement could be attributed to either method of instruction or a combination of both.

Summary

The hypothesis for this research project stated that “Explicitly Teaching year 5/6 students who have reading comprehension difficulties, to ask questions about text, and to think out loud and carry on an internal conversation based on these questions while interacting with text, will improve their level of reading comprehension.”

The data generated from formal and informal testing of the targeted students suggests that the teaching of the R.A.T. technique to year 5/6 students with reading comprehension difficulties, will make a significant difference to the reading comprehension skills of most students. As discussed in some cases it has been difficult to judge the influence of the withdrawal situation on the improvement in results. Certainly students who made little or no gain after the Guided Reading Sessions showed significant gains following the Targeted Teaching sessions. These gains were also maintained once targeted teaching had ceased. The students who made significant gains after the guided reading sessions maintained these gains after the targeted teaching sessions. Student 5’s results were inconsistent with the results of other children in the targeted group. It is reasonable to give less credence to these results as this student did not participate fully in the action research program.

The researcher believes that a further study would be required to validate the above data. This study should be carried out with a group being withdrawn for normal Guided Reading sessions, a targeted group being withdrawn for targeted teaching lessons on the R.A.T. technique and a control group, being a class group, undertaking their normal Reading activities within the classroom context. A more direct comparison of results could then be obtained.

The researcher is going to teach the R.A.T. technique to a year 5/6 class at Our Lady’s School. The researcher believes that with slight modifications it would be a valuable strategy for all children to have as they are called upon to interact with more complex texts. As there are 2 other 5/6 classes in the school the researcher will be able to compare the results for reading comprehension for the targeted class group against 2 control groups. This data will be used to assess the overall value of the R.A.T strategy.

Appendix A

Guided Reading Lesson Outline

1. The students gather in a quiet room, with chairs around a table. The teacher is part of the group but sits at the head of the table where he or she can be clearly seen by all students.
2. The children each have a piece of prose to read.
3. The teacher introduces the prose by asking questions e.g.
What is the title?
What do you think it is about?
What words might be in the story?
(All questions are teacher generated)
4. The children read the text to themselves.
5. The teacher moves around the students having them read a part out aloud.
6. When all children have completed the reading, the teacher asked questions, literal and inferential, about the text.
7. Students answer some questions orally and some in written form.
8. The students complete a task based on the text.
9. The teacher and students discuss the answers to the questions.
10. The teacher corrects students' written work.

Appendix B

Targeted Teaching Session 1.

1. The students gather in a quiet room, with chairs around a table. The teacher is part of the group but sits at the head of the table where he or she can be clearly seen by all students.
2. The teacher says to the children;
Today we are going to think and talk about what we do when we read.

What do you do when you are given a piece of text to read?

S1 – I just read it

S2- If there are questions, I read them first and then see if I can find the answers.

S3 – I just read it

S4 – I read the title and then the text

S5 – I look at the heading. I see if the words are hard, then I read it.

S6 – I read the title and then read the story.

S7 – I just read it.

What do you do if you don't understand what you are reading?

S1 – I just keep going

S2 – Try to pronounce hard words, re –read the text.

S3 – Ask the teacher what a word means. Look up the dictionary.

S4 – Ask for help. Just read another book instead.

S5 – Sound out words. Ask for help.

S6 – Reread the story. Skip words I don't understand.

S7 – I'm used to that. I listen to other kids.

What do you do if you don't understand the meaning of a word or group of words in the text?

S1 – I skip them

S2 – Try to pronounce them out loud

S3 – Look it up

S4 – Ask the teacher or mum.

S5 – Sound them out

S6 – Skip words I don't know.

S7 – I just keep going.

Today we are going to look at some ways to make understanding what you read easier for you. We are going to be explorers because I've never used this method before and I'm really excited that you are going to be the first students to use it and you're going to help me change it and make it work for you. O.K. Here we go! From now on we are going to be the R.A.T.s

The teacher introduces the cue card 1.	R ead	(Title, text,maps diagrams, pictures, captions)
	A sk	(Questions- who, what, when, why, how, which, huh!)
	T alk/Think	(To yourself, out aloud, to others)

Teacher uses an enlarged copy of a text.

Teacher demonstrates the R.A.T. technique out aloud using a piece of text. (In this case a P.M. Benchmark text, level 28, text called Tracks by the stream was used.)

Here is a piece of text. I am going to be a RAT! I am going to Read the title. "Tracks by the stream" Now, because I am a RAT, I am going to Ask myself, what might this be about? Now I'm going to Talk to myself about what it might be about.

Teacher demonstrates this by thinking and talking out aloud.

I wonder what the tracks are. Where is the stream?

The teacher invites the students to generate some thoughts and questions out aloud.

S2 – What kind of tracks are they?

S4 – They might be car tracks

S7 – Or animal tracks

S1 - I wonder if they are human tracks?

The teacher revises with the students, the R.A.T. technique.

What did we do first when we became RATS? (Read)

Then what did we do next? (Ask Questions)

What do we do last? (Think and Talk)

This procedure is repeated with 4 different texts. The concentration is only on the titles - reading, asking questions, thinking & talking out aloud.

Appendix B cont...

Targeted Teaching Session 2

Teacher led discussion of RAT technique as introduced in session 1.

1. *When we read text, what are we going to do?*

What do RATS do when they read text?

Student responses included;

- *Read the title*
- *Ask what you think it's about*
- *Ask other questions*
- *Talk to yourself about it*
- *Talk out loud about it.*

2. Teacher explains to the students that they can be **RATS** when they read a paragraph as well.
3. Teacher demonstrates the technique using the first paragraph of the text "Tracks by the stream"
4. Reads paragraph out aloud. Asks questions – What are pioneers? Where are they? Why are they there? Who are they? How did they get there? Is this an old story or a modern story?
5. Students generate their own questions out aloud.
6. Teacher gives each child cue card 2. On this card are the words who, what, where, when why, how, is, where. There is a space at the bottom to add other words. The teacher explains to the students that these are question starters. The students are to use these as book marks and when they are reading text they can use the card to help them ask questions as they read. Teacher points out that the **T** in **RAT** can stand for think as well as talk. The teacher explains to the students that they can think the questions in their head.
7. The students practice this technique using paragraph 2 & 3 of the text.
8. General discussion about how the children are feeling about using the R.A.T. technique.

(Students were very positive about the use of the technique)

Appendix B cont...

Targeted Teaching Session 3

Session 3 followed the format of session 2 i.e. recapitulation, teacher modeling, student practice of self generated questioning and using the RAT technique, teacher questioning and celebration of learning.

In this session the teacher introduced a more difficult text which was the basis for study in the classroom. The text was going to be used in the integrated studies program during the next week. The text was, "Making of Australia – The coming of the white man."

This text is in a booklet form and includes maps, diagrams and pictures. The teacher demonstrates how the RAT technique can be applied to each of these. Students then practice the technique. The teacher continues instructing the students in the use of the cue cards. The teacher develops questioning techniques and awareness by asking questions of the students, e.g.

What questions will you ask?

What sentence will answer a why, who, where, which, what, how, when question?

What did you do as you read?

What questions will you ask yourself about the map, diagram, or picture?

What questions do you have in your head?

Where did you get that question from?

(It was obvious from the student's questions and responses that they were asking more complex questions and thinking about the text as they read.)

Targeted Teaching Session 4 & 5.

These sessions followed the previous format of recapitulation, teacher modeling, student practice of self generated questioning and using the RAT technique, teacher questioning and celebration of learning.

Targeted Teaching Session 6

This session followed the previous format of recapitulation, teacher modeling, student practice of self generated questioning and using the RAT technique, teacher questioning and celebration of learning. However, during the teacher modeling segment, the "HuH!" post –it-note was introduced. This is a modification of an idea put forward by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis(2000). As the students come to a word, phrase, sentence or idea that doesn't make sense to them they mark it with a Post – it – note on which is written the word 'Huh!' The children use the RAT technique and if they still don't understand they read on. If later in the text the meaning becomes clear, they move the "Huh!" to the area where they have found clarification and draw a light bulb on the note. This is not to be seen as separate to the RAT technique but part of it when students are dealing with longer and more complex texts. It recognizes that students learn in different ways and gives

them a concrete image and reminder of what reading is all about i.e. making sense of text. It is very much part of the **T** of RAT, in that it supports the talking to oneself and the thinking about text.

Targeted Teaching Sessions 7 – 10

These sessions followed the previous format of recapitulation, teacher modeling, guided student practice of self generated questioning and using the RAT technique, including the “Huh!” cue strategy, teacher questioning and celebration of learning.

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