

Strategies for Promoting Collaboration in Reading Comprehension Lessons among Students with Learning Disabilities

Kelechi Uchemadu Lazarus, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

Efficient skills in reading comprehension enable secondary school students to make meaningful and remarkable advancements in their studies. However, many students with learning disabilities struggle with reading comprehension and consequently obtain low grades in their academic pursuits. This paper pointed out that improvement in reading comprehension and academic achievement among secondary school students with learning disabilities is possible through engaging the students in collaborative learning activities within reading comprehension context. The paper therefore highlighted the principles that guide collaborative classrooms and the benefits of student collaboration in reading comprehension context. Evidence-based interventions that emphasize collaboration such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, reciprocal teaching, collaborative strategic reading, and directed reading-thinking activity were discussed. Recommendations were made which include that teacher should ensure that they infuse collaboration into reading comprehension lessons of students with learning disabilities by making use of a variety of teaching strategies that stress collaboration, assigning roles to group members and ensuring that group members adhere to the laid down rules for the groups.

Keywords: reading comprehension, learning disabilities, secondary school students, collaborative learning strategies

1. Research Background

Secondary school students with learning disabilities possess unique characteristics that single them out from their peers without learning disabilities. They are a heterogeneous group of learners who display difficulties in at least one academic area such as reading, writing, mathematics reasoning and calculations and spoken language. The definition tendered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), the law which protects students with disabilities, and its proposed regulations in the Federal Register of the United States Department of Education (2005b) states that:

“Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to

listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantages” (Source: Proposed Regulations (pp 312-313), United States Department of Education, 2005b, Federal Register, Washington, DC)

Majority of students with learning disabilities, have reading difficulties that hinder their academic progress and general relevance in life. Lazarus (2009) reported that even within the language skill of reading that has five sub-skills: phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension; difficulties with reading comprehension remains a critical issue among secondary school students with learning disabilities. When secondary school students with learning disabilities find it difficult to comprehend written texts such as information in their textbooks, tests and examination questions, messages on phones, computer monitors or in social media, their overall academic achievement is affected negatively. As a result, there is mass failure in public examinations particularly, in Nigeria (Lazarus & Kehinde, 2015). Moreover, students' success in life, pursuance of post-secondary college diplomas and degrees is often tied to the student's individual ability to comprehend textbook information as well as information in other print media. All these are challenging for most secondary school students with learning disabilities (Lazarus, 2009).

Given these challenges, special educators are considering ways of supporting students with learning disabilities to improve ability in reading comprehension. Teaching secondary school students with learning disabilities effective reading comprehension strategies is a good way of assisting the students to enhance overall academic achievement. Moore (2012) believed that is important to teach secondary school students with learning disabilities how to utilize collaborative learning structures during reading comprehension instruction. Based on this assumption and in order to fully understand the fundamentals of collaborative learning practices within reading comprehension contexts among students with learning disabilities, this paper is anchored on the socio-cognitive theory of learning. The paper also discussed the principles that guide learning in collaborative classrooms, research-based evidences on teaching strategies that support collaborative learning activities in reading comprehension and benefits of collaborative activities in reading comprehension contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework Underpinning this Paper: Socio-Cognitive Theory of Learning

Lev S. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) considered the relevance of the social milieu of a learner in building his or her cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1978) when a learner begins to associate with other people in his environment and engages in

cooperative activities involving his peers, there is a reawakening of a variety of internal developmental processes. Thus, it can be said that “social interaction is the mechanism for individual development, since in the presence of a more capable participant, the novice is drawn into, and operates within, the space of the expert’s strategic processes for problem solving” (Vygotsky, 1978 cited in Donato, 1994). So, steadily, as a learner gets involved in collaborative interactions, he gets to internalize those associations and they become part of his own independent capabilities (Brown, Metz, & Campione, 1996).

Clifford (2016) supported Vygotsky’s viewpoint concerning the need for learners to engage in social interactions. Clifford (2016) stated that another important concept proposed by Vygotsky is the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD). Vygotsky stressed the need to identify two different levels of development in learners as teachers strive to provide effective instruction. There is a level tagged the “actual developmental level” as well as the “potential level. Those problems or tasks which a learner is able to solve or manage independently are at the learner’s actual developmental level whereas problems or tasks which a learner can solve or manage with the assistance, support, guidance or supervision of or in collaboration with more competent others. The discrepancy between these two levels is what Vygotsky called the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1986).

Thus, Vygotsky’s theory has implication for this paper. Through social interactions, peers influence one another in physical, cognitive and adaptive activities. For instance, dividing students into small groups during reading comprehension instruction provides them with opportunity for idea sharing, challenging of one another’s points and construction of higher level of knowledge. Students who are weak in reading comprehension can be grouped with others who are more capable than them. By so doing poor readers will be spurred into action in terms of trying to figure out the main idea or gist of reading texts.

3. Theoretical Framework Underpinning this Paper: Socio-Cognitive Theory of Learning

The following principles have been identified for effective learning in collaborative classrooms.

1. Interdependent and integrated social and academic curriculum. According to the Centre for the Collaborative Classroom (2015), effective collaborative learning requires that teachers integrate social development into the fabric of their work in the classroom. Students must explicitly learn social and emotional competencies to interact with others in ways that foster meaningful learning (Jones & Bouffard, 2012) and develop a sense of connectedness.
2. Caring relationships and inclusive and safe environments are foundational practices for both the student and school staff. In other words, a collaborative classroom is considered a safe place where caring relationships support learning, risk taking and

the development of a child's authentic self as well as his readiness to learn. Similarly, adult learners as well as teachers thrive on collaborative and constructivist approaches to professional growth.

3. Collaborative classroom learning experiences are often built around students who construct knowledge and engage in action. Teachers facilitate learning rather than play the role of information disseminators as is the case in traditional learning context, while students are more active because they construct meaning and apply new learning in a collaborative classroom. Thus, there is a more dynamic classroom interaction. Lessons in these classrooms provide rich opportunities for students to work together, grow ideas, revise their thinking and construct meaning. Whilst most of the dialogue is student-driven, learners in the collaborative classroom grow through the grades, as readers, writers, thinkers and principled people who express themselves with passion and intent (Centre for the Collaborative Classroom, 2015).
4. Honouring and building on students' intrinsic motivation leads to engagement and achievement. During classroom collaborative activities teachers support students' intrinsic needs for competence and autonomy in the classroom by helping students set achievable goals. So, students become more invested in the learning process (Carr, Borkowski & Maxwell, 1991).
5. For effective collaborative learning in the classroom members are required to: set group goals, have flexible group norms, engage in qualitative interactions among group members and maintain moderate group size precisely, comprising of 4-5 students (Clifford, 2016).
6. In addition, group members should have group roles, be good communicators, be accountable to one another, use real world problems and focus on enhancing problem-solving and critical thinking skills among group members. Besides, effective collaboration requires the use of scaffolds and technology and diversification of group members (Clifford, 2016).

4. Collaborative Learning in Reading Comprehension Contexts: Research-Based Evidences

This selected literature review focused on teaching strategies that support collaborative activities in reading comprehension such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, reciprocal teaching, collaborative strategic reading, and directed reading-thinking activity. Many of them are evidence-based interventions that have demonstrated positive influences on learning for all students across content areas and grade levels, including students with learning disabilities.

Cooperative learning was defined by Slavin (1983) as a set of task structures that require students to spend much of their class time working together in 4-6 members heterogeneous groups. They also use cooperative incentive structures, in which students earn recognition, rewards or (occasionally) grades based on the academic performance

of their groups. According to Johnson and Johnson (1989) cooperative learning is a form of collaboration that refers to working together to accomplish shared goals. Similarly, Tinzmann, Jones, Fennimore, Bakker, Fine and Pierce (1990) explained that whereas collaboration happens in both small and large groups, cooperative learning refers primarily to small groups of students working together. Cooperative learning strategy requires teachers to structure cooperative interdependence among the students. These structures involve five key elements namely, positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal and small group social skills, and group processing which can be implemented in a variety of ways.

There are also different types of cooperative groups appropriate for different situations (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2006) such as clock partners and numbered heads together. Dean, Hubbell, Pitler and Stone (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 20 studies and found the average effect size of 0.44, a result that further confirmed the same positive effects found within many previous studies that looked at both academic and emotional outcomes of cooperative learning. Similar to this, Uzoma (2015) conducted a study using 203 low achieving senior secondary class one students in Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria and found that cooperative learning strategy has some influence on achievement motivation of low achieving students in reading comprehension. Also, Adekola (2014) using 496 senior secondary students in south west, Nigeria, found that male low achievers performed better than their female counterparts when exposed to collaborative learning in reading comprehension.

Peer tutoring strategy involves two or more students who work together; teaching each other rather than learning from a teacher's direct instruction. Peer tutoring requires both the tutor and tutee to explain concepts to one another using many valuable communication skills including questioning, listening, explaining, summarizing, speculating, and hypothesizing (Topping, 2005).

Saenz, Fuchs and Fuchs (2005) investigated the effects of Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) on Spanish-speaking English learners with learning disabilities and their classroom peers. 132 students in grades 3 through 6 participated in the study along with 12 reading teachers. Saenz, Fuchs and Fuchs (2005) concluded that PALS was effective in teaching reading comprehension to English learners as well as mainstream students. Topping, Miller, Thurston, McGavock and Conlin (2011) reported that in peer tutoring research, students with a lower reading ability gained significantly more than their peers without learning disabilities, with girls gaining more than boys.

Reciprocal teaching strategy is a good example of a reading instruction strategy that is grounded on the Vygotsky's concept of ZPD (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Reciprocal Teaching (RT) is a scaffold discussion strategy used to teach multiple comprehension strategies. It is built on four strategies that good readers use to comprehend text namely, predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarising. Reciprocal teaching focuses on a dialogue between the teacher and students. Teacher scaffolding provides readers the

support they need in order to become successful at using four strategies. Students view the teacher modelling each of the four strategies, try the strategies out for themselves in a supported environment, and work independently using the strategies to comprehend text.

Takala (2006) incorporated both whole class and small group formats in the study on RT among 154 fourth and sixth graders in Finland. The experimental group received 10 to 15 sessions of intervention for 5 weeks during the regular 2 semesters in the classroom setting. Takala (2006) found that RT was effective in increasing comprehension in both mainstream and speech language impaired students. Furthermore, Okkinga, van Steensel, van Gelderen and Slegers (2016) conducted a study involving 369 low achieving adolescents in Dutch secondary schools and found that reciprocal teaching contributed to adolescent low achievers' reading comprehension only when experimental teachers provided high-quality strategy instruction.

Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) is a heterogeneous group strategy involving readers of varying reading comprehension abilities. It consists of four comprehension strategies that students apply before, during, and after reading in small cooperative groups. These reading strategies are (a) preview (before reading), (b) click and clunk (during reading), (c) get the gist (during reading), and (d) wrap up (after reading) (Lazarus, 2009). The teacher's role is to create learning contexts that encourage collaboration and that include guidance and supports so that students learn more than they would have been able to learn on their own (Wertsch, 1991). Also, collaboration occurs in student-led cooperative groups where each student is given a specific role (for instance, question expert), using the tenets of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1989, 2008).

Boardman, Vaughn, Buckley, Reutebuch, Roberts and Klingner (2016) utilized 60 fourth-and fifth grade general education teachers selected to teach 1,372 pupils from 14 primary schools from two states in the United States of America. The results demonstrated that students with learning disabilities who received CSR instruction in their general education classrooms-approximately 2 times each week over a 14-week period-made significantly greater gains in reading comprehension than students with learning disabilities in comparison classrooms ($g=.52$). Teachers in CSR classrooms were also more likely to provide feedback to students and to use collaborative grouping structures.

The Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA) developed by Stauffer (1969), is a group comprehension strategy that features prediction of story events prior to reading, reading to prove or modify predictions, and the use of divergent thinking (Lerner & Kline, 2006). A typical DRTA lesson involves the teacher who plays the role of the expert participant in guiding students in problem solving during reading. Bos and Vaughn (2006) argued that teachers will have to scaffold instruction so that there is a systematic movement from teacher modelling and control to student control. The teacher facilitates (but does not direct) thinking by asking questions on the text. Then he summarizes points

that student make during the discussion ensuring that his values or interpretations do not dominate but foster thoughtful student participation.

Consequently, Wells (2000) noted that in collaborative activities, participants contribute to the solution of problems according to their current ability to do so. At the same time, they provide support and assistance for each other. In a study conducted by Chaemsai and Rattanaich (2016) with 537 seventh grade students from Bangkok, Thailand, the experimental group was taught through DRTA while the control was taught using the traditional method. The results showed a significant difference in English reading comprehension and ethical awareness of learning English reading, between both groups. Students taught through the DRTA strategy had significantly higher English reading comprehension and increased ethical awareness.

5. Benefits of Collaborative Learning in Reading Comprehension Lessons

The benefits derived by students with learning disabilities from collaborative learning activities in the reading comprehension context include the following:

1. Improvement of reading and academic achievement. When students with learning disabilities participate in collaborative activities during reading comprehension this leads to improved reading comprehension achievement which in turn leads to increase in students' grades across the content-areas.
2. Enhancement of interpersonal skills. Students with learning disabilities, who engage in collaborative activities in reading comprehension, stand the chance of improving their personal effectiveness and social-relationship skills which will in turn enhance achievement in reading comprehension. For instance, students acquire help seeking behaviours, sense of belonging, skills for participating in school activities and following rules. Students also build their self-esteem through group activities.
3. Celebration of diversity. Collaborative activities help students to recognize and celebrate their diversity. During small group interactions, students with learning disabilities find many opportunities to reflect upon and reply to the diverse responses raised by group members.
4. Appreciation of individual differences. Collaborative activities in reading comprehension help students with learning disabilities to acknowledge their individual differences which in turn enable them to show respect and support to fellow students.
5. Maximization of instructional influence. Collaborative activities in reading comprehension create opportunities for teachers to maximize their instructional influence. Sometimes, the teacher assigns students to the groups based on his expertise; he assigns group roles to members and provides ongoing assistance during group interactions.

6. Supporting of individualized accountability. This is because each group member is expected to contribute meaningfully to achieve individual and group goals. By so doing, collaboration also supports team accountability.
7. Obtaining feedback. Students with learning disabilities may not be able to obtain feedback easily in whole class situations. Some of them may refuse to ask questions or respond to questions. Collaboration creates more opportunities to the students to obtain personal feedback.
8. Active involvement. Students with learning disabilities become actively involved in reading comprehension and overall academic areas when they participate in collaborative activities in reading comprehension context.
9. Fostering brainstorming and innovation. Collaborative activities in reading comprehension encourage honest discussion, critical thinking and concept formation among students with learning disabilities.
10. Boosting communication skills. Collaborative activities in reading comprehension contexts enhance communication skills such as presentation, leadership and organization among students with learning disabilities.

6. Conclusion

Student collaboration in reading comprehension context provides another effective means through which the problem of reading and particularly, difficulties in reading comprehension can be remediated among secondary school students with learning disabilities. Collaboration enables students with learning disabilities who have been described as passive learners to interact with their peers to unravel the content of reading passages. Students with learning disabilities get to learn question asking strategies, help seeking behaviors, communication skills appropriate for learning such as presentation, leadership and organization. They learn how to solve problems and get to boost their self-esteem. Collaboration also enhances reading comprehension and academic achievement of students with learning disabilities. All these benefits and many others accrue from participation in collaborative activities in the reading comprehension classroom. Collaboration can be effectively infused in reading comprehension by adopting evidence-based interventions such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, reciprocal teaching, collaborative strategic reading, and directed reading-thinking activity. Therefore, teachers of secondary school students with learning disabilities should utilize reading comprehension strategies that stress student collaboration for productive social interactions and improved reading comprehension.

7. Recommendations

In view of the foregoing discussion, and particularly, considering the benefits of collaborative activities in reading comprehension for students with learning disabilities the following recommendations were made:

- i. Teachers of secondary school students with learning disabilities should adopt teaching strategies that emphasize collaboration in reading comprehension such as

cooperative learning, peer tutoring, reciprocal teaching, collaborative strategic reading, directed reading-thinking activity and accountability talk. This is because scientific-research based collaborative instructional practices lead to enduring academic and behavioural outcomes for all students especially students with learning disabilities.

- ii. Bearing in mind the content of the reading passage, the interest of the students and abilities of the students, the teacher should select appropriate collaborative structures from available ones to implement with the students. Making the right choice of collaborative instructional strategy will eliminate boredom and enable the use of a variety of teaching strategies that stress collaboration among students with learning disabilities and that lead to increased reading comprehension achievement.
- iii. Appropriate reading comprehension stimulation should be enforced.
- iv. Teachers should stress the importance of collaborative instruction to the students continually.
- v. Teachers should not create room and opportunity for passive learning in the reading comprehension classroom.
- vi. Group members should have assigned roles.
- vii. There should be laid down rules for the groups.
- viii. The teacher should ensure that group members enforce the group rules.
- ix. Group activities should provide enough opportunities for critical thinking and honest discussion.
- x. Adequate motivation and reinforcement should be provided to encourage students with learning disabilities to participate in group activities within the reading comprehension context.
- xi. Fidelity measures should be put in place to check whether or not collaborative activities in reading comprehension contexts are implemented as intended.

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