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Reading Comprehension – Teachers’ Conceptions and Reported Teaching Activities.

ABSTRACT

The study investigates relationships between teachers' experiences of reading comprehension and their teaching of comprehension, in the context of reading aloud to pupils in the first year of Swedish compulsory school. A qualitative phenomenographic design is used, focusing the relationship between what- and how- aspects. The teachers' conceptions of reading comprehension represent the what-aspect, while description of their teaching of reading comprehension represent the how-aspect. Interviews were conducted with 36 teachers in 36 schools. The aim of the analysis was to distinguish and group similarities and differences; firstly regarding teachers' conceptions of reading comprehension, and secondly, concerning the teaching they described. In the third and last step, the relationships between conceptions and teaching were analysed. Three main categories and four subcategories of description were identified, showing variations of conceptions of reading comprehension and their relationships to the eight instructions reported. Results show discrepancies between teachers' conceptions of reading comprehension, and the instructions they reported. In spite of describing a more complex understanding of reading comprehension, their teaching practice were mainly reported to represent general and more isolated activities, rather than more interrelated and strategic activities

Introduction

The study investigates teachers’ conceptions of reading comprehension and how these relate to their reported experiences of teaching reading comprehension, when reading aloud to pupils in the first year of Swedish compulsory school. Reading aloud is very common in school and is seen as an important part of development of early literacy. With an increasingly complex society, demands on being able to handle multiple texts and to read critically increase (New London Group, 1996). The belief that cracking the code, and learning to read with some fluency, automatically enables the reader to get to the meaning of the text, is challenged by much more complex views of reading comprehension (Duffy & Israel, 2009). Reading comprehension is defined as an interactive, changing, never-ending process of meaning-making, involving the reader, the text and the activity, as well as the socio-cultural context in which it is situated (RAND, Reading Study Group, 2002). According to Dooley and Matthews (2009), the development of reading comprehension starts early in childhood. Pressley and Wharton-McDonald (2002) conclude that “there is substantial evidence that elementary students can learn to comprehend” (p. 277). The links between oral language skills and reading comprehension are well documented, and oral vocabulary is seen as one of the most important factors when a child is learning to read (cf. Kendeou et al., 2009; NRP, 2000).

Duke and Pearson (2002) suggest a model for teaching reading comprehension, which starts with the explicit instruction of strategies, and gradually moves to students being responsible for their own use of strategies. They point out that teaching reading strategies must be combined with other activities and forms of instruction, in a supportive classroom context. Duffy and Israel (2009) sum up current research, and conclude that strategies instruction should focus on being more “strategic” generally, instead of

teaching single strategies one at a time. Effective comprehension instruction cannot be “simply sequenced, scripted and packaged” (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2009, pp.565-6). Rather, it ought to result from teachers applying their conceptions about reading comprehension, and their ability to design activities that will meet the needs of their students. Applegate et al. (2006) show that individual students have different reading profiles, and that there is a need to closely match instruction to the readers. Teaching vocabulary is not enough, since acquiring more comprehensive, general language skills at early ages has also proved to be of great importance to reading comprehension (NICHD, 2005).

In an often cited study, Durkin (1978-1979) examined reading comprehension instruction using classroom observations and found that very little teaching of strategies for reading comprehension was going on in the late 1970s. Teachers merely assessed students’ comprehension by questioning and through written assignments. Pressley and Wharton-McDonald (2002) drew the same conclusion more than twenty years later and studies by Parker and Hurry (2007) and Fisher (2008), confirm the tendency. Even if teachers’ conceptions of reading comprehension may be characterised by complexity, the relationships are far from clear between these conceptions and actual teaching strategies applied in practice. Against this background, the aim of this study is to describe teachers’ conceptions of reading comprehension, as well as the activities they describe they use in teaching reading comprehension to see how conceptions and activities are related to each other. The context of the study is teachers reading aloud to seven year old pupils in the first year of Swedish compulsory school. Reading texts aloud to children and talking about texts is a commonly recommended activity, to enhance children’s literacy development supporting vocabulary, comprehension and motivation (Snow et al., 1998; Adams, 1990).

Reading aloud to children

In a longitudinal study of reading comprehension development Meyer et al. (1994) found that the amount of time American first-grade teachers spent reading to their pupils was not related to their reading achievement. This suggests that simply reading aloud is not sufficient to support pupils’ development. Other researchers have focused on the effects of teachers’ styles while reading aloud to children. They found that when teachers explain and involve pupils in discussions while reading, the effects on pupils’ vocabulary and comprehension increase, compared with when teachers just read, without discussion (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002). A recent synthesis and meta-analysis of read-aloud interventions for children at risk for reading difficulties shows positive effects on language awareness, concepts, comprehension and vocabulary learning (Swanson, et.al. 2011). Several studies demonstrate that reading aloud enhances vocabulary learning (see for instance Beck & McKeown 2001). Based on research and observations in classrooms Beck and McKeown (2001) also developed an approach called Text Talk, to make reading aloud in kindergarten and first grade more effective in enhancing children’s language and comprehension abilities. Text Talk incorporates careful selection of challenging texts, the use of open questions and follow-up questions to give children the possibility to elaborate their responses and construct meaning, instead of mostly recalling information. Pictures are presented after the text is read and discussed, in order to avoid pictures drawing the attention away from the text. Particular attention is paid to the use of background knowledge in a meaningful way and explicit work on vocabulary. Santoro et al. (2008) also show good results from using a framework especially designed to teach comprehension through read-aloud in first grade. Key components were vocabulary, text structures, explicit comprehension instruction and text-focused discussions.

Reading aloud is a very powerful and common way to develop early childhood literacy in both a broad and more particular ways. On the same time there is deeper request of being more systematic and strategic. Thus, this suggests that there is a need to further investigate the relations between teachers’ conceptions of reading comprehension and how reading comprehension could be instructed when reading aloud to children .

Method

A qualitative method was adopted in this study, to investigate teachers' conceptions of reading comprehension and their experiences of instruction, reading aloud to pupils in the first year of Swedish compulsory school. The method has been developed in phenomenography (Marton 1981; Svensson 1997; Marton & Booth 1997; Anderberg et al., 2008). The primary focus of phenomenographic research on learning is to describe qualitatively different ways in which something is understood, experienced and conceptualised. For an outline of the historical background and development of classical phenomenography see Svensson (1997). An overview of phenomenography is provided in *Learning and Awareness* (Marton & Booth 1997). The starting point is the internal relation between the individual and the world. This means that it is not the individual and not the world but the relation between them in terms of the activity of the individual and variations of that activity. The methodological principles developed in phenomenography concerns qualitative interviewing using semi-structured techniques. A question about a subject matter framed the interview and this is a core element in phenomenographic studies. This is in line with that the individual - world relation forms the basis of the research, and is understood in terms of intentionality. Also, even if the individual experiences is focused, the analysis of data does not focus the individual variation but the variation of contents in those experiences. Of this follows that two variations found could be represented by one individual. One issue frequently discussed in phenomenographic studies has been the relationship between the *how*- and *what*-aspects (Harris, 2011). In this investigation, the *what*-aspect corresponds to teachers' conceptions of reading comprehension. The *how*-aspect is treated in terms of a set of elements appearing in teachers' descriptions of activities they use to teach reading comprehension.

Data collection

Data was collected by students' in the context of a teacher education programme, in an assignment on teaching reading comprehension through reading aloud. Students participating in a course in teaching and learning language and literacy were required to conduct semi-structured interviews with practising teachers (their supervisors) (35 women 1 man) from 36 schools, before they started planning their own lessons during their school-located studies. A primary school teacher in Sweden has a university degree after studies including subject matter, pedagogy and school located studies, during 3,5 to 4 years. An interview-guide was provided by the research group (see Appendix 1). No observations of the teachers were carried out.

Analysis of data

The interviews resulted in 36 transcribed protocols. Of these protocols, 5 were not included in the analysis, because the students had not asked all the questions, or the questions were not fully spelled out and the teachers had problems to understand the question. The aim of the analysis was to distinguish similarities and differences, firstly, with regard to teachers' conceptions of reading comprehension - the *what*-aspect – and secondly, with regard to activities employed in reading comprehension instruction - the *how*-aspect. Finally in the last step, the relationships between the *what*- and the *how*-aspects are analysed, this is regarded as the main results of the study. The aim of the analyses is not to capture the totality of teachers' experiences. Rather, the study strives to capture variations in the relationships between the variation of conceptions of reading comprehension and teaching of reading comprehension. The analysis began with selecting parts that was relevant to the aim of the study. Since we were not interested in reading-difficulties, these parts of the data was not analysed. The analyse continued with analysing and describing qualitative similarities and differences of variations of experiences of reading comprehension and teaching reading comprehension in the interviews. Understanding each interview protocol in comparison to other protocols and to the whole data. Delimitation and grouping of parts that are of similar and different character and describing what is similar and what is different. These descriptions is

then used to further analyse the data and justifications is carried out in an ongoing process. This is also at the same time a process of judging the investigation when on the same time grouping the variations found and describing them. To judge the quality is largely a matter of judging the usefulness of the categorisation, whether they capture the variation found. The process is ended when the justification of the descriptions is satisfied. Interjudge reliability have been used to ensure reliability. The criterion is based on converging results generated by different members of a research group or/and that other co-judgers can fit the data to the results. In the present study, the same ten interviews were first independently analysed by each of the four members of the research group and then discussed. This resulted in a common picture regarding the what- and how-aspects of the ten interviews. We then decided to proceed in the same manner with the analysis of the remaining data, with minor adjustments. Number counts have not been carried out since the categories found do not represent an individual, two or more categories could be represented by one individual. Some excerpts from the interviews are presented in connection with the results. However, the excerpts only reflect certain dimensions of this process, since the analysis was not based on isolated segments, but instead considered each interview as a whole, seen against the background of the variation found in the other interviews.

Results

The results are presented in two parts, where the second part is to be regarded as the main result.

Conceptions of reading comprehension – the what aspect

The result of the analyses of the first step present a number of differences and similarities, which are grouped into three main descriptive categories and four subcategories. These categories show qualitative differences and similarities in conceptions of reading comprehension found. The categories are inclusive and hierarchical, in the sense that the relationship between the categories is of particular character. Conceptions represented in the category Emergent reading comprehension are also present in the other two main categories and likewise conceptions represented in the category Developed reading comprehension are also present in the third category, Advanced reading comprehension. The most common conceptions of reading comprehension found in the data are described in the categories developed and advanced reading comprehension.

A. Emergent reading comprehension

This category describes conceptions of reading comprehension of an emergent character, where focus is on literal understanding of vocabulary and text, and recall of facts. Included in this category is also the ability to summarise, retell, and talk about the text, but mainly on a surface level.

We can have discussions about the text to check their reading comprehension. What has happened? Who are the persons in the story, who is the main character? And then what has happened and how? (9)

B. Developed reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is here described as more than just the ability to understand the text literally. In order to comprehend in a developed manner, there is a need to make interpretations to some extent. The ability to transform texts into alternative expressions of comprehension is also included in this category.

Predictions and simple conclusions based on the content

It is necessary to be able to “read between the lines”, to make inferences, go beyond the literal understanding of the text, and use some knowledge of context.

It is about reading between the lines, that they can understand what might happen. (15)

Transformation of content into other / alternative expressions

To comprehend a text may mean to be able to transform the meaning into alternative expressions such as constructing mental images representing text content, making drawings, re-phrasing the content in writing, or dramatising the content.

It's like listening to music, you close your eyes and then you see things. (1)

C. Advanced reading comprehension

Reading comprehension in this sense includes deeper reflections around the text in various ways, as well as a meta-cognitive ability to monitor one's own comprehension.

Interpretations and deeper reflections beyond the content

Reading comprehension demands the ability to relate what is read to oneself and one's own experiences, including feelings, relating it to other people's experiences, to other texts, as well as knowledge of the world.

...then the children have to reflect themselves about what happened. That they can make connections to their own experiences. (22)

Comprehension monitoring

An important part of reading comprehension is to be able to know when what is read is understood, and when it is not.

.../that the children understand that it is important to comprehend what is read. (4)

Relationships between the what- and the how-aspects

The results of similarities and differences found in the second step of the analysis are grouped into eight instructional components of reading comprehension instructional activities. With instructional components we mean a main critical feature appearing in teachers' descriptions, but which does not describe the activity as a whole. In the third step, the way these components appear in the what-categories is analysed. Part II -describes the relationships between categories of reading comprehension and teaching activities.

Retelling

Retelling is a common critical component when the teachers describe their teaching and is found in nearly all of the interviews, though mainly in connection with the what-category *Emergent reading comprehension*. With retelling means that the teachers instruct the pupils to retell what the text is about after the reading.

Well, it is very much a matter of telling, talking about what you have read. This is extremely important for reading comprehension, I think. (20)

Vocabulary

To explain and talk about words and phrases meanings that were central in the text was also common instructional activities. The teachers draw students' attention to these words and elaborated to provide reflections on tentative meanings and de-contextualised definitions more than functional meanings. This component is found at all what categories, but is more pronounced in connection with the what-category *Emergent reading comprehension*.

And then, that they understand the words and notions. And otherwise, of course you have to explain (5)

That it should be meaningful is important, I think, when you are building up a vocabulary and there is a lot of talk about themes. I don't mind working thematically, so then you lay the foundation for the words that you use. Then you use the correct words and not simplified words when you are talking with the children, I feel, so that you can introduce technical terms and more difficult words. (25)

Prior knowledge

This critical component describes instructional activities that involve activating and recognising insight into prior knowledge, and the context and setting of the text. This component is distributed among all the what-categories, but does not occur frequently.

Talking about: What do you think will happen? Talking about the title and the caption, to raise a thought. Because if you then realise that “aha, this is going to deal with ...”, then it is easier to approach the content afterwards. Actually, it becomes a track into it, in the direction you are headed for afterwards. (2)

Drama, art and music

Constructing representations of the content of the text in other ways than verbal is an instructional activity used to enhance reading comprehension. Such representations could include drama, art-work, or music. This activity is mainly represented in connection with the what-category *Developed* reading comprehension.

And then, of course sometimes you can paint to it; that you don't talk, but instead you say: now you can paint something to what you heard today. And then, afterwards, then they can tell about what they were thinking of, which part they found especially interesting, and why they picked that rather than something else, and how it stands in relation to what was read. Then you can dramatise, and let them act something that they heard, and then they have to talk about what was read as well. And if there are three children in a group or so, then they get to process part of what was read on their own, before they act it. (12)

Direct questions

Asking questions is an instructional activity that teachers very frequently are engaged in. This component is found in all the interviews. However, the questions used are of different character, but what is common is that they have particularly direction and aim at direct answers.

Most frequent are questions used to assess and evaluate the pupils' reading comprehension - *controlling questions*. Controlling questions are mainly connected to the what-category *Emergent reading comprehension*.

Then you ask questions afterwards maybe, and check that they followed (the story) and listened. (15)

Teachers also ask *deliberate questions*, making the children use certain strategies, such as summarising, drawing conclusions and inferences. These activities were represented in the categories *Developed* and *Advanced* reading comprehension. Deliberate questions sometimes include a notion of explicit teaching, starting at a general way advancing to the use of the various strategies in more complex activities.

... /you often have slightly different questions, where you sort of can find the answer immediately, and such questions (where you need to) read between the lines, to get the answer. /.../ of course, you maybe start with the simple questions in that case, and choose a story which is as extremely clear as possible /.../ So that they feel, well this is fun, and this is something I understood. Then, of course, you can choose a bit more difficult ones later, or else you can ask them, what they think he was thinking at that moment? That you sort of try to think a bit onwards in the story on your own. (13)

Another kind of questions found in the data concern raising the pupils' motivation and engagement, and drawing the pupils into the story. Such *Motivational questions* are linked to the what-category *Advanced* reading comprehension.

.../that when I see that maybe one is not quite focused when I am reading, in that case I make a point of asking a question to precisely that child. Not to put it into an awkward position in any sense, but to pick up interest again and involve that particular pupil in the conversation. (28)

Deeper conversations

Teachers also describe questions that do not require direct answers of the kind outlined above. Instead, they are involved as part of teachers' strategies to enhance pupils' deeper understanding and to encourage the pupils to reflect and interpret, make comparisons with other texts and what they know about the world, and ultimately draw consequences from what is read. These *conversational questions* differ from the type of questions that require direct answers, in the sense that they are part of an ongoing conversation around the text aimed at probing understanding beyond the immediate context. Deeper conversations are not common, and are only represented in the what-category *Advanced* reading comprehension.

And that we talk a lot about, well actually, that it can have a message, something in a fairytale, or that the author wants to say something with the book; that you should understand what it is about. A deeper meaning, we might say. /.../ I mean, there are so many things to discuss around the content in a book, and how they can associate to their own experience. So there are different qualities in that as well, if they can relate to something they have read, based on their own experience. So that is a higher level than just being able to retell a text. (20)

Language features

With language features we mean distinctive outlines, vocabulary or text types that could be recognised and enhance comprehension. Instructions for recognising different *text types* (such as narrative texts, folktales, fables or non-fiction) is a component of teaching linked to the what-category *Advanced* reading comprehension but is not so common, found in a few interviews.

Non-fiction and fables, for instance, well, that you try to talk about differences, and similarities; well mostly it's the differences. Yes, and what characterises a fairy-tale, for instance, a fable and so forth. (20)

The component also includes the ability to recognise the styles of writing that different authors use.

But drawing conclusions in that case about texts, and comparing, and maybe recognising different authors' manner of writing, and this way, well it's a bit of a further development of this thing about understanding. (12)

Active and critical reading

Students' need instructions to develop as active and critical readers/listeners, monitoring their own comprehension, and to be encouraged to ask questions if they don't understand. This is another teaching activity linked to the what-category *Advanced reading comprehension*, but is found only in a few interviews.

But that you right from the start say they should raise their hand if there was something they didn't understand. (20)

Pupils are further encouraged to evaluate the texts, in order to see that people have different opinions and interpret texts differently.

.../talking about books. And then the form very much depends on different tasks. All the children get an opportunity to say what they liked and what they didn't like. If they have any questions about the content, and finally, if they can see any patterns in the story. /.../ You write on the board what all the children said they liked, some of them maybe liked the same thing, and what they didn't like, and then the questions they have. They can then get a totally different picture of the book. (30)

Another way of reading critically is to discover value judgements in a text, whether these are explicit or hidden, and then be encouraged to make comparisons to their own values and moral concepts. This will involve the ability to reflect, and to discuss these reflections with others.

.../ and let the pupils sit in groups and discuss, for instance something which is about a moral concept. Afterwards, I can ask questions like: "How do you feel they acted, was it right or wrong?" The pupils get to discuss and you can't discuss this unless you understood...(35)

Discussion

The what-categories *Developed* and *Advanced* conceptions of reading comprehension, were most represented among the teachers. However, the most commonly used instructional activities are represented in the how-components *Retelling*, *Vocabulary* and questions of the type *Controlling questions*. The what-category *Elementary reading comprehension* was less common, as well as the how components *Prior knowledge*, *Drama, art and music*, *Deeper conversation*, *Language features*, *Active and critical reading* and questions of the types *Motivational* and *Deliberate questions*. The latter set of components are here considered to involve instructional activities which are more related to strategies of approaching a text as a whole, and allowing pupils to reach deeper levels of reading comprehension, as well as grasping various specific features of the text.

Results point to a discrepancy between teachers' descriptions of their conceptions of reading comprehension, on the one hand, and the actual instructions reported on the other hand. This discrepancy was most obvious in the categories *Developed* and *Advanced* reading comprehension which were most common among the teachers. However, the most commonly reported instructions tended to be more isolated and general, and thus were considered belonging to *Emergent* reading comprehension. Those interrelated and specified instructional activities which corresponded to *Developed* and *Advanced* reading comprehension were more seldom reported.

One of the most common how-elements described in the interviews was to pose questions, grouped into the instructional components *Asking direct questions* and *Deeper conversations*. This is in line with earlier research (see for instance Pressley & Wharton McDonald, 2002; Parker & Hurry, 2007; Beck & McKeown 2001). Parker and Hurry (2007) interviewed and observed teachers in London, focusing on how they used questions in reading comprehension instruction. Three levels of text comprehension were identified: literal, inferential and evaluative, where the last level involved a personal response of some kind from the reader. They conclude that "only occasionally are teachers' questions used to assist pupils to develop more elaborated ideas" (p. 311), and argue that this tends to make pupils much too passive. As in Parker and Hurry's study, teachers in the present study express conceptions of reading comprehension that show more complexity. Nevertheless, the most common teachers' activities still involve *Questions as control*, rather than *Deeper conversation*. Questions are also seldom used as a deliberate tool to teach reading comprehension strategies, even if this is mentioned in a few interviews. Of course, it is important to bear in mind the context of our study, involving very young school children who just started their formal education at the age of seven. The pupils' age may naturally have an impact on the type of questions used. Even so, the results seem to fit into a larger pattern. Beck and McKeown (2001) stress that reading aloud to children and helping them develop reading comprehension is a demanding task, especially when reading to young children.

Read-aloud have impact for both word learning and/or comprehension. *Vocabulary instruction*, one of the components was most common together with *Questions as control*. Studies on vocabulary instruction in read aloud contexts (see for instance the meta-analysis of read aloud practice effects carried out by Swanson et al 2011) shows that it is strongly used to develop students understanding of vocabulary and this is particularly important with low-verbal children and is strongly correlated to vocabulary learning (Kindle,

2011). However, in this investigation it was clear that the teachers use this instruction to the outcome of comprehension at a deeper level and not mainly vocabulary learning. According to Teale (2003) it is important that teachers should be more strategic in their way of using instructions when reading aloud and in that way be more effective and save time. If they want to reach reading comprehension then the instructions used should encourage the pupils to be engaged, use prior background, predict how the story continues in the book. These kind of instructions are in line with those instructions that were not so commonly reported by the teachers.

Several of the comprehension strategies that teachers are recommended to teach, such as summarising, predicting, drawing inferences, and monitoring for understanding (Snow, 1998), text structure, visual representations (Duke & Pearson, 2002), and building vocabulary (NRP, 2000), are found by teachers in our study to some extent. However, it is interesting to note that the discrepancies found between the what-aspect and the how-aspect make it explicit that the types of reading comprehension that the teachers intended to develop do not correspond to the various activities reported. If a stronger relation between the what-aspect and the how-aspect should appear, the most common what-category should have been *Emergent reading comprehension*. One explanation could be that the teachers did not seem to think of their instructional activities as aiming to develop specific strategies for more developed reading comprehension. The teaching was not strategic since they were isolated from a particular strategy. Another explanation may be that these teachers are not familiar with recent research concerning reading comprehension instruction or there is a lack of research. Relevant research on ways to develop reading comprehension through different instructional activities in primary classroom settings may be lacking. It is also possible that observing the teaching had lead to other conclusions. However, the results may also be interpreted as reflecting a context, where the talk of explicit teaching and detailed and structured planning has been downplayed over the last twenty years or so. This may partly be due to a strong impact of constructivist views of learning, (which is what Pressley & Wharton-McDonald (2002) assume) and partly due to many teachers' approach to teaching as an ongoing process, where children and teachers work together in an integrated curriculum, with a high level of individual adjustment. Teachers need not only knowledge about reading comprehension, but also increased knowledge on how to apply their knowledge in a complex classroom setting, where individual pupils' needs should be met. Important is to link strategies of reading comprehension to teaching activities in a close and corresponding way.

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Appendix

Interview guide

- 1) What kind of books do you use when you read aloud for the pupils?
- 2) How do you know that the children understand the text when reading aloud?
- 3) What activities enhance pupils reading comprehension when reading aloud?

- 4) What would you suggest to help pupils that have problem with their reading comprehension?
- 5) How do you teach reading comprehension when reading aloud?

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