

Embedding Opportunities for Book-Talk within the Secondary English Classroom

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Context

I teach English at Hamilton Grammar School: a state-funded, mixed comprehensive secondary school in South Lanarkshire, Scotland. The school has a roll of around 1300 students, who represent a broad socio-economic demographic. Approximately 30% of learners come from SIMD 1 and 2 or are entitled to free school meals.

Recent efforts within the English Department have focused on improving access to high quality, accessible personal reading texts. Following the re-purposing of the school library in 2017, students had limited access to texts in school, and no consistent approaches existed to promoting reading for pleasure within the English Department. Over the past three years, PEF funding has been used to build a modern library within each English classroom. The Accelerated Reader framework is used to estimate students' reading development and provide class teachers with a tool to match BGE learners with personal reading texts suited to their reading ability. A 'reading passport' programme is used to encourage students to reflect on their reading, set targets and record achievements. All students in S1 and S2 are assigned 10 minutes personal reading time at the start of each lesson.

Research Inspiration and Rationale

“A key impact of the classroom book talk and inside-text talk was the shared understanding...that reading is intrinsically worthy of discussion; everyone responding to reading and sharing responses was positioned to achieve success.”

(Cremin et. al., 2014, p98)

My existing work on promoting independent reading has treated it as a component of the curriculum which can be used to raise attainment. Consequently, I have focused my efforts on ensuring the availability of texts, providing students with texts matched to their level of comprehension development and monitoring engagement. I'm beginning to view this approach as overly mechanistic: there is perhaps too much focus on looking for evidence of improvement and too little focus on creating the conditions needed for reading to become an embedded feature of learners' lives. I know what students are reading and how difficult the text is in relation to their demonstrated ability, but not how learners make sense of the texts they read- or how they connect their reading with real-life experiences.

Little classroom time is dedicated to encouraging student-led discussion of texts with the aim of promoting construction of meaning through interaction. When discussions around reading take

place (between teacher and learners), the discourse tends to gravitate towards volume, speed and quality of reading.

Typical dialogue focuses on asking students to summarize plot, comment on interesting uses of literary features or learn the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. Interactions are rarely spontaneous and, I imagine, learners do not perceive them as informal. While discussion of books and the value of reading does take place, the time spent enjoying reading for its own sake is eclipsed by the amount of time spent promoting the desirable academic consequences of reading. Moreover, current approaches to discussing texts are usually didactic in nature: I typically lead the discussion of books with my students.

The act of reading is too often validated only insofar as it can be seen to promote academic (and this often means measurable) progress. I feel that my approach to promoting reading for pleasure conflates two complimentary, though distinct, aims: teaching students to read and engendering the will to read.

Reading Instruction is oriented towards:	Reading for Pleasure is oriented towards:
Learning to read	Choosing to read
The skill	The will
Decoding and comprehension	Engagement and response
System readers	Lifelong readers
Teacher direction	Child direction
Teacher ownership	Child ownership
Attainment	Achievement
The minimum entitlement (A Level 4)	The maximum entitlement (A reader for life)
The Standards Agenda	The ECM and Personalisation Agendas

(Table: Cremin et. al., 2009, p33)

Aims

- Create opportunities for learners to engage in informal discussion about reading.
- Shift the power dynamic within the classroom by empowering students to discuss reading on their own terms.

Outline

1. Reading partners

Following 10 minutes of personal reading time at the beginning of an English period, students were given ten minutes to discuss what they had read. Students were told that

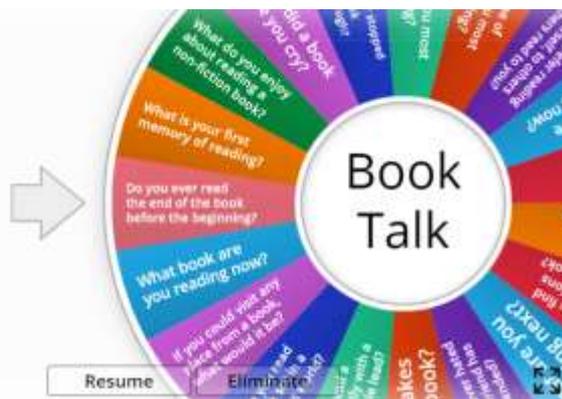
they could talk about any aspect of their reading that they wanted to- however, they had the option to use a simple placemat which contained three segments: 'what I have read', 'what I thought about it' and 'how I connect my reading with the real world'. Following the discussion, students were asked to write down one thing they discussed on a sticky note.

Reading Partner Discussion

- You are now going to spend 10 minutes talking to your partner about your book.
- Feel free to talk about anything do to with personal reading.
- If you find it helpful, you can use the placemat to help you.



2. Whole-class Book-Talk



Students were asked to spend five minutes discussing a question- which was selected at random from a 'book talk wheel' (created by Jon Biddle from Moorlands Primary Academy). Students were given five minutes to discuss each question in pairs- then encouraged to share their opinions during whole-class discussion.

3. Flipgrid video journals

Students were asked to keep a video journal in which they recorded their reactions to the book they were reading. They were asked to record their responses in the form of a one-minute video using the app 'Flipgrid'. The app allows student to blend video, audio, text and graphics. Students were then asked to view each other's journal entries and leave comments (in the form of opinions and questions).



4. Book Election



What are you voting for?

- You are going to help choose the books which we buy for the school library this year!
- Every student in S1 and S2 will be asked to vote for the book they want added to the school library.
- You will be asked to find a book that you think is worthy of being in your class library- and explain to the class what makes it so special.
- Once everyone has voted, we will select the most popular books and buy them.
- In the new year, each class will get a delivery of new books which have been selected by the students.

All students in S1 and S2 took part in a project to select new books for their classroom libraries. The project involved students researching newly published books and explaining to their classmates why the books should be bought. A shortlist was created, which all students were asked to vote on. The 10 most popular books

were purchased, and copies given to each classroom in the English Department. Students were asked to review the new books and leave comments on a wall display.

Impact

1. Reading partners

After four attempts at using this approach, it became clear that students were struggling to engage in unstructured book talk: they struggled to find things to say about their texts and I was observing an increase in discussion unrelated to reading. When I discussed this with students, they explained that it was difficult to know what to talk about. They felt that they quickly ran out of things to say and thought that ten minutes was too long to spend discussing their texts. This effect was most pronounced in the least able readers:

What did you not enjoy?

“You don’t know what to say about your book...it’s better when you put the questions up on the board.”

In an attempt to shift the power-dynamic towards learners, I challenged students to do too much too soon. Unstructured book talk requires students to have achieved several things: they must have recently completed a suitable amount of reading, understand what factors make a book enjoyable to them, evaluate the text they are reading and have the confidence to express their opinions (without much preparation time) to their peers. This is a challenging task which places lots of intrinsic and extraneous cognitive load on learners- and many were not prepared to undertake a task of this complexity.

2. Book-talk class discussion

This approach was far more popular with students than ‘reading partners’. The vast majority of students voted to continue with this task next year. During discussion, there was clear focus on the task and most students were excited by the discussion. The nature of the task provided students with the scaffolding needed to form opinions on their texts. Discussing the task in pairs provided the opportunity for learners to compare and test their thinking before engaging in the, potentially socially daunting, task of sharing ideas with the

class. The whole-class discussion section also allowed students to hear, and respond to, a wide range of opinions- whereas 'reading partners' limited the views students heard.

What did you enjoy about it?

"[class discussion] lets your friends recommend new books to you. My friends recommended lots of different books- I didn't know about the Dork Diaries series or Everything Everything.

It easier to talk about books with all your pals- if it's not your friend, you might get people who have different interests."

The quick-fire nature of the task (each question took five minutes) meant that students were kept stimulated and did not dwell too long on questions which they did not like. Although this approach perhaps sacrificed richness of discussion and handed students less control than 'reading partners', that was a necessary trade-off at this stage of their development.

3. Flipgrid video journals

Some students engaged very well with this method. The platform appealed to those who enjoy making their own video content. The open nature of the task meant that students were able to respond in a range of ways, including readings from their book, videos of the book jacket, summary of the best bits, discussion of characters and settings, shots from film adaptation of the book, and graphics. Some students used only audio while others used only text.



The novelty of the platform motivated some students to spend more time and effort on it than they typically do in class. However, uptake was not high; only one third of students involved completed a journal. Some pupils struggled to grasp how to use the app while access to technology was a barrier for

others (all students were given the option of using a school Chromebook to complete the task, but none were borrowed). Despite small numbers of students producing a finished journal entry, a considerable number of students watched or commented on the videos of their peers. I feel this approach needs to overcome significant inertia if it is to work well: students need time to become familiar with the platform and the process. This may involve seeing other students engaging successfully with the process to build confidence. This approach has the potential to encourage a community of readers: it allows students to

positively reinforce one another's efforts, choose how they respond to their reading and react at a time and place of their choosing.

4. Book Election

This approach had the highest level of student engagement; all S1 and S2 classes in the school were involved. Students enjoyed the 'realness' of the task and were excited by the prospect of having the power to be involved in selecting new books. Students were engaged in the process of discovering what new literature exists (the 'Love Reading for Schools' booklists provided helpful summaries of newly-published texts). The election led to some passionate discussion about why certain books deserved students' votes. Some students were keen to campaign for a book from their favourite genre while others connected their chosen book with current affairs (the texts 'This Book is Anti-Racist' and 'Freedom' prompted discussion around the Black Lives Matter movement). The majority of students rated this as their favourite method of engaging in book talk.



"The *Lost Soul Atlas* is about a boy named Twig who wakes up in the afterlife. It's dark and he's alone as he walks through the darkness - and remembers things from when he was in the living world.

I liked it because it was mysterious and you didn't have a clear idea of the situation at all times.

I was surprised that the book was about the afterlife, because I expected it to be about travelling around the world." (Morgan)



Which type of book-talk was your favourite?

Choosing books during the 'book election' last year. I liked getting to look at all the books and getting to choose the ones that we got in."

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

There is a need to explicitly teach students how to talk about books

At the outset of the enquiry, I did not appreciate the complexity of book talk; it is deceptively hard for some students. It requires them to engage in complex cognitive thinking (such as decoding and comprehending meaning, noticing, and interpreting literary features) and metacognitive thinking (such as monitoring comprehension and reflecting on the impact of the text). Next session, I will support students to develop the knowledge and confidence needed to engage in successful book-talk. This will involve using a structured approach at the beginning of the year- which will include explicit modelling of what book-

talk sounds like. Gradually, I will reduce scaffolding by having students take greater control over the questions they ask and how they choose to respond to texts.

There is a need to consider readers' ability when designing opportunities for book-talk

While some students were able and willing to engage in book-talk with minimal instruction and support, these tended to be students who are confident readers. The most able students were able to discuss (and even evaluate) the stylistic features of their books- and engage with plotlines and characters on an emotional level. Additionally, the books read by less able readers are often less complex: they contain simpler plots, characters and often lack the thematic richness seen in texts consumed by more able readers. Additionally, participating in book talk with more able readers may serve to actively highlight the disparity in readers' ability: students will be made aware that they are reading things which are simpler than other students in the class.

This does not, I think, lead to a need to stream students by ability during book talk. Not least because conversations between students of different reading abilities may lead to productive peer mentoring partnerships: able readers may be able to model book talk and assist their less able peers in constructing their own opinions. However, there is a need to be aware of the potential downfalls which can come with asking students of different reading ability to work together. In the future, I will pay closer attention to the ability level of students who are engaging in book talk. This may involve encouraging partnerships between particular pairs of students, rotating discussion partners frequently or using friendship groups to organise discussion.

Motivation comes with giving students control

Students were most enthused when they had an active say in what they were reading. Selecting and voting for books generated excitement within the class and led to enthusiastic discussion of texts. The fact that the task was time bound, had a clear outcome and involved an element of competition seemed to increase students' motivation. Furthermore, this method of book talk required the least scaffolding: students were able to explain their reasons for wanting to buy new books with little guidance. More than any other method, the book election allowed students to form a community of readers who had agency over what they read. However, the effect of this method is short lived: the project quickly passes. Therefore, while this form of book talk is effective for generating interest and motivation, creating enduring, rich book talk requires the use of other methods.