

‘I liked the text about the little bird.’ Five intellectually disabled persons talk about texts

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(Received 12 June 2011; accepted 29 February 2012)

The aim of this pilot study was to investigate if Reciprocal Teaching (RT) could scaffold the active reading of adults with intellectual disabilities. A study was performed with a group of five intellectually disabled participants, aged 28–42 years. The participants were able to decode words but they read very slowly and in an uncritical way. The participants were exposed to a programme for reading strategies instruction, Reciprocal Teaching. This programme is influenced by the concept of scaffolding, which is an application of Vygotsky’s theory of the importance of interplay between support and challenge for development. In RT the text is read paragraph by paragraph. During the reading four reading comprehension strategies are practised: generating questions, summarizing, clarifying word meanings or confusing text, and predicting what might occur in the next paragraph. To start with, the participants (a) did not like the idea of text talks (b) did not like stopping to discuss after each paragraph (c) had a tendency to drift away from the text. However, after a few text talks they became familiar with the idea of text talks and the four strategies. The participants appreciated the text talks and said that they wanted to continue with them.

Keywords: participation; intellectual disability; reading comprehension; structured text talks; scaffolding

Introduction and background

Swedish policy in the area of disability focuses on ‘Identifying and removing obstacles to full participation and full equality in society’ (Socialstyrelsen [National Board of Health and Welfare] 2006). The Handicap Inquiry of 1989 states that ‘We will use the concept participation in the sense of active participation in social life . . . People with disabilities should be in the society together with and on the same conditions as all others’ (Swedish Institute 2000). According to the Social Services Act in Sweden, the Social Welfare Committee shall endeavour to ensure that persons who, for physical, mental or other reasons encounter difficulties in their everyday lives, are enabled to participate in the life of the community (Social Services Act chapter 5, section 7).

Participation is a concept that may be seen from various perspectives and requires a longer discussion than this article allows. Gustavsson (2004) problematizes the concept of inclusion – ‘lives side by side’ – with that of participation. As opposed to the concept of integration, which would seem to focus attention on adapting the individuals and positioning them in society, the concepts of inclusion and exclusion move the focus to

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the environment or community in which the individual attempts to participate. Participation can be restricted due to functional impairments and environmental factors (WHO 2002). While striving to help a person with an intellectual disability to be active, it has not led to positive outcomes related to a participatory life in the community (Brunt and Hansson 2005; Dahlin and Rosenberg 2010).

The number of young people who are placed in Swedish DA (=Daily activities)¹ has dramatically increased, by 174% since 2002 (Socialstyrelsen [National Board of Health and Welfare] 2008). There are of course several plausible reasons for this increase and one that is seldom mentioned is reading ability. Many intellectually disabled persons leave secondary school/upper secondary school with limited reading ability (Skolverket [National Agency for Education] 2002; Skolinspektionen [School Inspection] 2010). Studies have also shown that reading and talk about texts are rare in DA and in group residences. An investigation of the cultural praxis of group residences indicated that the residents lived a rather 'empty life' compared to the population in general. It was found that everyday literary practice was non-existent. The recreational activities offered to intellectually disabled people seem to be pacifying and offer no intellectual challenges (Färm 2004, 299).

Most spare time for the intellectually disabled was restricted to waiting: for supper, physical rehabilitation, transportation, walks and to go to bed. Färm (2004) argues that reading individually or in groups nourishes the needs of disabled people to use their imagination, experience intellectual challenges and a feeling of community. However, the reading materials in the group residences were mostly designed for children, and there were no easy-to-read books for adults. This also applies to the selection of movies. Moreover, the music most commonly played was children's songs (Färm 2004, 297). Research, however, suggests that age-differentiated recreational activities and age-differentiated books are very important in enhancing and/or maintaining motivation. Thus, it would be unwise to narrow the choice for adults to what is traditionally perceived as children's activities (Färm 2004). Considering the present state of reading in DA, it would be interesting to investigate the possibilities of designing a pilot study in which participants in DA would talk about texts before, during and after reading. Studies have highlighted the benefits of systematic instructional scaffolding. Several programmes have been used. One of them is Reciprocal Teaching, (Palincsar and Brown 1984). This programme will be presented below. Consequently, the aim of this pilot study is to investigate if Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown 1984) and the use of easy-to-read narrative texts designed for adults can scaffold the active reading of adults with intellectual disabilities.

Reading comprehension – a question of participation

The literature review reveals that there is little Swedish special education research on the decoding ability and reading comprehension of the intellectually disabled (Emanuelsson 1997; Granlund et al. 1999; Fischbein 2011). The review also reveals that international research seems to focus on intellectually disabled persons' decoding ability where intervention studies have been frequently used. Reading comprehension seems to have attracted less research.

Most reading interventions delivered to students with intellectual disabilities are aimed at promoting reading for functional use in daily living (Connors 1992; Houston and Torgesen 2004). Functional literacy practices, usually, involve decontextualised drills and practice focusing almost exclusively on the identification

of individual words such as cautionary words (e.g., danger, do not enter, private, dogs) (Katims 2001). Functional literacy supports the deficit model of special education which attributes learning and behaviour problems to shortfalls that lie within the students (Browder et al. 2006; Trent, Artiles and Englert 1998). This perspective contrasts with the sociocultural paradigm for instruction which emphasizes the strengths and knowledge students with intellectual disabilities bring to the classroom (Trent, Artiles, and Englert 1998).

Research has shown that people with intellectual disabilities tend to decode words more slowly than their non-intellectually disabled peers². In addition it has been demonstrated that intellectually disabled readers –like many other readers- have a passive reading approach. They lack knowledge of reading strategies and experience difficulties in monitoring their understanding (Alfassi 1998). Furthermore they exhibit very little use of metacognitive considerations such as control mechanisms, planning or awareness of their own knowledge and ability (Erez and Peled 2001). They tend to fail to use memory and rehearsal strategies effectively and, moreover, seldom spontaneously initiate questions, organize, chunk, or elaborate in ways that facilitate learning (Turner, Dofny, and Durka 1994)³.

These skills may be improved by interacting with written language (Kaderavek and Ravidoux 2004). Researchers have demonstrated that intellectually disabled persons-like all other readers-need systematic and structured teaching in reading comprehension (Farrell and Elkins 1995; Browder et al. 2006; Afassi, Weiss, and Lifshitz 2009). This claim has been made in several intervention studies. Dutch researchers have investigated how reading comprehension for 12-year-olds with mild intellectual disabilities can be improved (Varnhagen and Goldman 1986). The point of departure is that people with intellectual disabilities do not comprehend casual relations within written texts. For 30 minutes a day over eight weeks, the students were given exercises to develop their ability to draw casual inferences. Emphasizing causality, the researchers hypothesized, would enhance the students' reading comprehension and the hypothesis proved to be valid. Both expository texts and narratives were used in the study. In order to measure the comprehension level the students were asked to a) retell what they had read and b) answer a series of why-questions.

Systematic and structured text talks

In the last decade the use of the sociocultural approach to the teaching and instruction of students with intellectual disabilities has become more common (Browder et al. 2006; Wishart et al. 2007). Inspired by the work of Vygotsky (1978), it has been suggested that reading comprehension is acquired through an interactive social setting that enables students to negotiate with their peers and teacher to make meaning from the text. While negotiating students are initiated into the cognitive practices and strategies of skilled comprehenders, which are then internalized.

During the eighties a programme for strategy instruction, Reciprocal teaching (RT), was developed for struggling readers (Palincsar and Brown 1984). RT refers to an instructional activity that takes place in the form of a dialogue between teacher and students reading segments of text. *The strength of RT is that it focuses on reading to learn rather than learning to read.* The teacher and students take turns assuming the role of teacher in leading this dialogue. RT is thus a group activity, in which students read a passage of text, paragraph by paragraph. The dialogue is structured via the use of four strategies:

(a) Prediction

This occurs when students hypothesize what the author will discuss next in the text. In order to do this successfully, students must activate the relevant background knowledge that they already possess regarding the topic. The students have a reason for reading, i.e. to confirm or disprove their hypotheses. Furthermore, the opportunity has been created for the students to link the new knowledge they will encounter in the text with the knowledge they already possess. The prediction strategy also facilitates use of text structure as students learn that headings, subheadings and questions embedded in the text are useful means of anticipating what might occur next.

(b) Generating questions

When students generate questions, they first identify the kind of information that is significant enough to provide the content for a question. They then pose this information in question form and self-test to make sure that they can indeed answer their own question. This is an important strategy for active reading. Many students with comprehension difficulties tend to read texts in a passive way, they are not aware that as readers they are expected to question what they read.

(c) Clarifying

When the students are asked to clarify, their attention is called to the fact that there may be many reasons why text is difficult to understand (e.g., new vocabulary, unclear reference words and unfamiliar and perhaps difficult concepts). This is an activity that is particularly important when working with students who have a history of comprehension difficulties. These students may believe that the purpose of reading is saying the words correctly; they may not be particularly uncomfortable because the words, and in fact the whole passage, do not make sense. They are taught to be alert to the effects of such impediments to comprehension and to take the necessary measures to restore meaning (e.g., reread, ask for help).

(d) Summarizing

This provides the opportunity to identify and integrate the most important information in the text. Text can be summarized across sentences, across paragraphs, and across the passage as a whole. The four strategies are examples of the kinds of cognitive activity that successful learners engage in while interacting with text (Palincsar and Klenk 1992, Bereiter and Bird 1985).

RT is closely coupled to sociocultural theory (cf. Cazden 2001). Sociocultural theory highlights the importance of the social setting as, it is argued, this aids the learner in his/her proximal zone of development (ZPD). However, theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) are quite vague on 'how' to instruct through utilizing the notion of ZPD (cf. Rogoff and Wertsch 1984). And little concrete advice is given. Perhaps one could view Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a *learning theory* rather than a *teaching theory*. Contemporary sociocultural theories tend to speak about scaffolding as a metaphor for ZPD (Cazden 2001). RT attempts operationally to define the metaphor of scaffolding through its four strategies and its emphasis on structured learning

according to Palincsar and Brown (1984). This may also be the theoretical motivation for using the small-group design, as teacher-led small groups is a collaborative activity which provides more opportunity for peer to peer learning than e.g. individual deskwork or lecturing activities. But unlike in student group work, the teacher is present in this model to steer the text talk.

Thus the RT programme stresses the importance of; (i) teaching the students to learn and (ii) fostering responsibility for one's own learning. Hence RT tries to build bridges between the cognitive and the sociocultural perspectives.

Since the introduction of the reciprocal teaching programme (Palincsar and Brown 1984) numerous studies have been conducted to examine its efficacy; most of them implemented in formal learning settings from elementary school through to college. These studies have revealed improvement in students' abilities to summarize, generate questions, clarify and predict (Rosenshine and Meister 1994; Alfassi 1998). Surprisingly little research, has been conducted concerning extending reciprocal teaching to include those with intellectual disabilities. Notable exceptions are studies by Alfassi, Weiss, and Lifshitz (2009) and van den Bos, Nakken, Nicholay, and van Houten (2007).

Method

Participants

There were five participants in the study. They were between 28 and 43 years of age. None had access to the labour market but attended DA. The DA attended by the five participants focused on media studies. They read books and wrote reviews in a newsheet distributed to other intellectually disabled persons. According to their supervisors they never discussed what they read either with their supervisors or their friends in DA. The participants were able to decode words but they read very slowly and in a passive and uncritical manner.

The definition of intellectual disability as stated by the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR 2002, 8) was utilized in the study presented here:

... a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills
 ... This disability originates before age 18 (see also Greenspan and Switzky 2006).

Instruments

Decoding ability is a key contributor to comprehension. It was not possible, however to use standardized tests to test their decoding ability as one of the participants had poor motor control.

Since the literature review reveals that many intellectually disabled persons come into contact only with literature that is not age differentiated the researcher wanted to avoid this situation. Consequently the participants were asked what texts they were interested in and the researcher was somewhat surprised when they answered texts written by Selma Lagerlöf. From her own practical experience as a teacher, the researcher knew, that today it is almost impossible to read authentic versions of Lagerlöf's texts in either comprehensive or high schools. The texts are too long, have too many infrequently used words and the syntax is too difficult. Since there was a newly published easy-to-read version of 'Julrosen' (*The Christmas Rose*)⁴ available,

the researcher decided to use that publication. However, as most of the main characters in this book are women the researcher also chose *The open nib. Modern folk tales*, written by Per Gustavsson, a book of short stories where men play a dominant role.

The opinions of researchers are divided over whether to use authentic or easy-to-read texts. Studies have demonstrated that many shortened easy-to-read texts are more difficult to make meaning from than the authentic texts. Supporters of easy-to-read texts mean that such texts are preferred since they are short, have short sentences, short, frequent words etc. Supporters of authentic texts often turn to theories of cohesion, which state that language depends on cohesive devices and the more coherent a text is, the easier it is to understand. Because most easy-to-read texts are created using readability formulas that cut word and sentence lengths and omit connectives between sentences in order to shorten them, they lack the cohesiveness of authentic texts. Therefore according to researchers many attempts of simplification often result in a text that is more difficult to understand than an authentic text since the process of simplification itself has given rise to removal of structures that are relevant to facilitate understanding (see Crossley et al. 2007).

It is difficult to construct a coherent representation if the text information is too skeletal and if the relations between text entities are more frequently implied rather than explicitly stated (Pretorius 1995; Reichenberg 2010). In this particular study easy-to-read texts were chosen because the authors had managed to revise the short stories in a coherent way. Words and sentences had not been cut and there were causal connectors such as *so, because, since in order to*, between the sentences. Such connectors are necessary to explain cause and event. The authors had just omitted long, descriptive passages and thus made the easy-to-read texts shorter than the authentic ones. Furthermore there were a mix of frequent and infrequent words. Consequently the participants could be challenged in the zone of proximal development (cf. Vygotsky 1978).

Intervention as a tool for inclusion

The intervention design constitutes a tool for situating reading and text talk in a context that can function as a scaffold for reading comprehension and as a bridge (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus the design will facilitate everyday conversations in the private sphere about what one has read in a book, a newspaper, on an I-pad or a web page (Englund 2007; Habermas 1991). However, it will also affect the reader's participation in the public sphere and consequently reduce the gap between the reader and society. Contemporary society is highly dependent on texts in order to communicate, e.g. emails, messaging, browser in the Internet, reading books, instructions, making financial decisions, navigating your way to an unknown destination (Barton 2007).

In today's society your rights are not given to you, you as a citizen need to claim them by constantly reading and talking about what you have read with others (Englund 2007; Habermas 1991). If you can not master the word you are unable to claim your rights. LSS (1993:387). (LSS = Swedish Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments) is an entitlement law that guarantees people with extensive and permanent functional impairment good living conditions, ensuring that they receive the help they need in daily life and that they can influence the support and services they receive. Since it is an entitlement law, the support and service are not given automatically, they have to be requested for. To be

able to request them you need good reading comprehension so that you know what to ask for and how to make a request.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Regional Ethics Committee in Gothenburg. The participants were given both verbal and written information outlining the details of the research project. Informed consent was secured by providing consent letters and consent forms for all five potential participants.

Then the pilot intervention study was performed. RT was practised in eleven structured text talks. All the text talks, which were video recorded, were led by the researcher. The video- recording was done by another participant in the DA. The study started in September 2008 and finished in February 2009.

Since one of the participants had difficulties talking, the researcher read the text aloud, paragraph by paragraph. After each paragraph the researcher stopped and the four strategies were practiced. After finishing each text talk the content was summarized. The structured, segmented text talk led by the researcher-the guided practice-served as a scaffold to support the participants when practicing the strategies.

Results

First the presentation of the results from the text talks and then the evaluation of the text talks will be presented.

The first text talks

Three tendencies were noted at the beginning of the text talks:

1. The participants did not like the idea of talking about texts.

Sophie: It is much more important to read and write reviews on your own than to listen to what my friends have to say about a text.⁵

Supervisor Tanja: But it may also be vital to listen to what other people have to say and not only write reviews.

As can be seen from the excerpt above the supervisor supported the study. She told us that neither she nor her colleagues in the DA had thought of having text talks with the participants before.

Although the participants did not appreciate the text talks at first they were fully aware of the importance of talking about texts:

Anne: Mummy usually tells me that I will not develop if I just write down my own thoughts.

2. The participants did not like the idea of segmenting the text into paragraphs or that we stopped after each paragraph to practise the strategies. They wanted the researcher to read the whole text at once.

Researcher: Is there anyone who would like to ask a question?

Caroline: Please go on reading.

...

Caroline: I want you to go on reading.

...

Caroline: Please go on reading now ...

3. They had difficulties focusing at the task in hand, i.e. the text. They had a tendency to drift away from the text. Although they reflected upon the subject in general they did not do so in relation to the specific text being read.

How did it proceed?

During the following text talks the participants practised the four strategies diligently and began to appreciate the segmentation of the text. The texts by Selma Lagerlöf will be presented first with examples of each strategy practised.

Clarifying and generating questions

In a large forest called 'Göinge forest', lived a bandit family, the bandit father, the bandit mother and their five children all lived in a large cave in the forest. Father bandit was an outlaw. Anyone could catch him and kill him. He had committed theft and many other crimes. That was why he was an outlaw and hid himself in a cave in the forest.

After this segment was read the researcher encouraged the participants to use the strategy of clarifying:

Researcher: What about the words. Were there any new words?

Anne: What does it mean to be an outlaw?

Researcher: Yes, what does it mean to be an outlaw?

Researcher: In those days an outlaw was a person that anyone could kill without being punished for it.

From earlier studies the researcher has found that it was not a good strategy to ask: 'Were there any words you did not understand?' because many students either tend to overestimate their understanding or they are afraid to admit that they do not understand (Reichenberg 2010). Consequently the researcher chose to ask 'Were there any new words?' The text excerpt above shows that the strategy worked. Anne does not know what an outlaw is. The researcher does not explain what the word means immediately. Instead she uses the strategy of *turning back* to the participants and only when she realizes, that they do not know the meaning of the word does she explain it.

Generating questions

Researcher: Are there any questions that you would like to ask Selma Lagerlöf? (*The Christmas Rose and Other Short Stories*)

Anne: Why did they live in a cave?

Researcher: We are not told that in the story.

Anne: Why did they not live in a palace like they usually do in other fairy tales?

In the text excerpt the researcher reminds the participants that it does not say in the text why they lived in a cave. The researcher does not give the participants the answer. The strategy works and Anne elaborates her question by saying: ‘Why did they not live in a palace like they usually do in other fairy tales?’ Here is an example of intertextuality. Anne has read many fairy tales and in these tales the main figures usually live in palaces. Anne activates this relevant background knowledge regarding the topic, and this generates a question about why the main figures in the narrative just read do not live in a palace.

Anne: I have watched something like this on TV. *Sound of Music*.

Researcher: OK.

Sophie: *Sound of Music*. There are nuns in *Sound of Music*.

Anne: Yes they live in a convent. But this film was about a nun. You are not allowed to speak in a convent until the sun rises. If you speak you are not allowed to live in the convent.

Caroline: I think it is curious that they have to change their names when they become a nun, Mother Theresa, Sister Elizabeth

Having read the segment above Anne continues to make intertextual references, this time from the film *Sound of Music*. And Sophie follows up. She remembers what the film was about and this makes her burst out with: ‘There are nuns in *Sound of Music*.’ Then Anne follows up and activates her prior knowledge about the film and this encourages Caroline to continue, by activating her prior knowledge about life in convents and she declares ‘I think it is curious . . .’ Here we have a real text talk. The researcher does not need to encourage them to reflect upon what their peers have said; they do it spontaneously, and what is more, they adhere to the content of the text.

Let us examine the excerpt below where they continue generating questions. We have to admit that Caroline has a point when she bursts out: ‘Selma is dead.’ She is quite right; Selma Lagerlöf died in 1940.

Sophie: Why was the monk angry?

Anne: Why did he talk like that?

Anne: What were the bandit mother and her children doing in the monastery garden?

Researcher: Do you want to ask Selma Lagerlöf a question?

Caroline: Selma is dead so I can’t ask her.

Researcher: No, but you can ask her text.

After the next segment has been read Caroline asks for clarification:

Go to hell, your devil, the monk cried. In that moment there was a silence. The angels stopped singing, the birds stopped chirping. The angels and the birds disappeared . . .

Caroline: ‘Go to hell’ Can you really curse in narratives?

Anne: You cannot curse . . .

Caroline is upset when she asks if they are allowed to curse in narratives. Anne follows up and informs her that it is forbidden. The strategy of clarifying was also practised when studying a photograph of Selma Lagerlöf.

Researcher: Do you think the Lagerlöf family was rich or poor?

Alice: I think they were poor.

Researcher: Why do you think that?

Alice: Because she looks poor. Her face, ... She looks rather serious.

Caroline: But Alice? Do you know how old Selma is in this photograph? Can I ask a question: How old is she?

Alice: I know but ...

The participants discuss Selma's age and the conclusion is that she must have been 70 years old when she was photographed.

...

Caroline: She is wearing a dark dress, white collar ... I don't know how much you had to pay for a dress in those days.

...

Alice: I think that once she had bought that dress she did not have much money left.

Caroline: However we don't know how much money she had when she was twenty years old.

In the text excerpt above Caroline challenges Alice in 'the zone of proximal development'. Alice thinks that Selma Lagerlöf was very young when she was photographed. However Caroline makes her realize that this was not the case. Caroline reflects ... 'we don't know how much money she had when she was twenty years old.'

As mentioned above, at the beginning the participants were not comfortable with not knowing instantly how the story would end but this was about to change.

Prediction

Researcher: What do you think is going to happen to the bandit family?

Sophie: I don't know.

Anne: I think the police will come and catch the children's father (from *The Christmas Rose and Other Short Stories*).

Anne activates her prior knowledge. She knows that is forbidden to steal and rob. Consequently she concludes that the police will come and take the bandit father away since he had stolen and robbed.

The researcher reads 'The Christmas Gift' from *The Christmas Rose and Other Short Stories*.

It is Christmas Eve at Mårbacka. I am ten years old ... All the family is gathered ... We have had Christmas dinner ... Soon Father Christmas will come ...

After reading the segment the researcher encourages the participants to predict what will happen.

Researcher: What do you think Selma Lagerlöf wanted for Christmas when she was ten years old?

Caroline: Books.

Sophie: Books.

Anne: Perfume.

Alice: Clothes.

Researcher: We will see what she wanted.

...

Anne: I have visited Mårbacka. I bought a butter knife in the souvenir shop.
Researcher: Sophie, you told me some time ago that you have visited Mårbacka too.
Sophie: Yes.
Researcher: Do you know where Mårbacka is situated?
Sophie: In Värmland.
Researcher: Yes, that is right.
Alice: I think I have been there too.

...

Researcher: Let us listen to what gifts Selma got from Father Christmas.
[The researcher goes on reading]. She got a storybook in French. Do you think it was nice of her parents to give her a book in French?

All: No.

Anne: It was unfair of them if they knew she could not speak French. You must buy books that the receiver can understand.

Caroline: French is something you learn when you are 16-17 years old.

...

Researcher: Do you think Selma managed to read the storybook?

Sophie: I really hope so.

Anne: Maybe she was clever at languages.

The text excerpt above shows that the participants are eager to make predictions. They have various suggestions about what the ten-year-old Selma wanted for Christmas. Anne and Alice guess that Selma wanted to have clothes and perfume while Sophie and Caroline guess books. All the participants thought that Selma's parents were unfair when they gave her a book in French. It is interesting that the participants underline the importance of getting books that you can understand. They have probably met texts in and outside of school that they have not been able to understand.

The participants are very engaged and suddenly Anne remembers that she has visited Mårbacka. Sophie even knows that Mårbacka is situated in Värmland. While the talk is going on Alice remembers that she too has visited Mårbacka.

Summarizing

Researcher: Would you like to summarize in your own words what this short story was about?

...

Alice: It was about a bandit family. And that was an outlaw and how they wrote a letter and when he was no longer an outlaw. It was about how he was freed from all suspicions and so. That was what it was about.

Researcher: I think that is a very good summary that Alice made.

Anne: Then they went to the monastery to have a look and one of the children discovered a red door in the garden which was not closed. Well, then someone came and shouted that they were not allowed to be there and then another one came that said; 'do you like flowers?' ... Hans [sic the father superior, researcher's comment] died but he had kept some roots that he [sic the monk, author's comment] planted and he watered and he waited but nothing happened until next Christmas. Then he saw that it was a strange flower. Then he understood that it was Absalon [sic the bishop, researcher's comment] that should have this flower ... (*The Christmas Rose and Other Short Stories*)

First Alice makes a short summary in her own words then Anne follows up and elaborates it.

The open nib

The researcher reads a segment from *The open nib. Modern folk tales.*

It was Saturday afternoon. My brother Mats intended to repair his car. Helen, his wife went out shopping.

The researcher encourages the participants to practise prediction:

Researcher: What do you think is going to happen now?

Anne: I think she will buy food for dinner . . .

When she came back from her shopping she saw that the car was parked outside the garage. When she passed the garage she saw two legs underneath the car- She thought that it must be her husband repairing the car and wanted to pat him and so she did. She patted him on his fly zip.

Researcher: What do you think is going to happen now?

Alice: I don't know.

Anne: I think that she will lie down on the top of the car or something like that.

[Caroline laughs . . .]

She declared: "Hi, my darling, I am back." Then a bang was heard.

Researcher: What will happen now?

Anne: Maybe the mechanic will be squeezed because the woman falls down on him.

Caroline: I think about her hand . . . [laughs].

Afterwards she went into the house. She was really surprised when she found her husband there. He told her that he had sent for a mechanic to repair the car.

Researcher: How does this hang together?

Anne: Was it the mechanic and not her husband that she had patted?

Caroline: Was it the same man that repaired the car?

Researcher: We will wait and see.

Then the woman realized that she had confused the car mechanic for her husband. Then the mechanics entered the kitchen. He had a big bruise on his forehead.

Researcher: How do you think Helen felt?

Anne: What a mess.

Caroline: She has made a fool of herself.

Anne: She realizes that she has patted the mechanic on his fly zip. She feels so embarrassed and decides to apologize.

Researcher: How do you think the mechanic looked when he entered the kitchen?

Anne: His face was like a tomato.

Caroline: Just like a tomato, I think so too.

Sophie: Like a tomato. Hardly.

Researcher: How did it continue do you think?

Anne: I think he knocked his head.

Caroline: I think he got so scared when the woman patted him on his fly zip that he hit his head against the car.

Researcher: The story ends there. It is an open ending.

Caroline: It is a pity that the story is so short. It is so exciting. Will she get him (sic the mechanic, researcher's comment) or not?

Anne: Caroline, since you are fond of writing why not write how the story will end.

Researcher: Do you have a suggestion? Both Anne and Caroline have suggestions.

Anne: Helen bursts out: 'What has happened to your forehead? You were underneath the car . . . and when you began patting me on the fly zip I was so scared that I bashed my head on the car.' Then Helen says: 'I really want to apologize and then she offers him a cup of coffee.'

Caroline: I had a suggestion but I feel embarrassed to say it. Now because our supervisor Tanja has entered the room. However, my suggestion is: When the mechanic entered the kitchen he made a sign with his finger

From the text excerpt above we can see that the participants generate questions arising from the text they heard. The researcher does not give them answers. She just says we will wait and see and then she continues reading the next text segment. When the participants have heard the last segment Caroline bursts out ‘She has made a fool of herself.’ Anne follows up and activates her prior knowledge about what you ought to do when you have done something embarrassing. Both Caroline and Anne use the simile ‘His face looked like a tomato.’ The participants are engaged and have different suggestions about how the story will end.

The participants’; evaluation of the texts and the text talks

After the last text talk there was an evaluation of the texts and the text talks. The participants appreciated the text talks and said that they wanted more of them.

Researcher: What did you think about the texts we read?

Anne: She (sic Selma Lagerlöf, researcher’s comment) writes in an old fashioned way. It is not the language we use when we speak . . . it makes it more interesting to read. When I am reading I always check the spelling. I don’t know why I always check the spelling. She spells in an old-fashioned way *hv* instead of *f*, *Hvad* (sic *what* in English, researcher’s comment). I don’t spell like that. In the book *Jerusalem* she also spells in the old fashioned way.

Sophie: I *think it was exiting*.

Alice: I liked the text about the little bird. I don’t know why I was moved by it.

Sophie: The animals’ New Years Eve. It was so exiting but especially when the clergyman took his Bible and threw it in order to extinguish the fire.

Caroline: When you read about the passage where the monk met the bandit family in the monastery garden. I made a mental image in my head. There were bright colours.

Even when asked to evaluate the texts the participants make intertextual references. Anne remembers one of Selma Lagerlöf’s books, *Jerusalem*, which was published in 1904. She informs us that the spelling is old-fashioned in that book and that she does not spell that way. Caroline’s comment is worth noting. ‘When you read about the passage where the monk met the bandit family in the monastery garden. I made a mental image in my head. There were bright colours.’ Caroline has realized what reading comprehension is about. When you are able to make mental images from a text you have read than you have really understood what the text is about.

All participants and their supervisors said that they had very much appreciated the text talks. Some of them had even changed a medical or doctor’s appointment in order not to miss the text talk and all wanted them to continue.

Limitations of the study

There are several limitations with this study such as (a) there were no pre-and post-tests (b) too few participants. (c) no control group. However it is just a pilot study. These questions will be addressed in a forthcoming study.

Conclusions

The literature suggests that the traditional approach to literature instruction for individuals with intellectual disability concentrates on the acquisition of isolated reading skills.

This pilot study, which draws upon sociocultural theory, suggests the use of a literary programme-RT-in which adults with intellectual disabilities are exposed to narrative texts. Through repeated and shared dialogues they were able to make meaning from the text. The participants enjoyed and seemed to learn from narratives through listening and talking about the texts. The results are here in line with those of Knip Häggqvist (2010). This could probably be explained by the instructional scaffolding provided by RT. However, no pre-/post tests were conducted at this stage. Thus future studies focusing on adult intellectually disabled persons are needed to validate the potential causal effect of the operational application of the RT scaffolding.

At the beginning of the study the participants were uncomfortable about not knowing instantly how the story would end and did not ask any questions or explicitly reflect upon what was read. However, this changed.

After some text talks they began initiating inferential questions, the answer to which are not clearly expressed in the text, meaning that the participant had to 'read between the lines'. The participants also reflected on what was read and were able to make predictions and demonstrate that they had a metacognitive awareness since they were able to identify words and constructions they did not understand. Somewhat surprisingly they also made numerous intertextual comments. This may highlight the potential benefits of systematic instructional scaffolding. It produces a social setting where participants show that they feel comfortable actively making talks about texts when they have a structure to rely on in their learning, together with a teacher and peers who actively challenge them.

Reading and talking about texts is also vital to both participating in the private and public spheres of society (Habermas 1991). Many intellectually disabled persons are excluded from activities in society and from working life because they have difficulties in reading and writing. If intellectually disabled people are to gain access to the labour market reading comprehension is a vital tool and this will not be successful if just sight words are learnt. The intellectually disabled have to be challenged in the zone of proximal development. In this pilot study the participants demonstrated that they have unexpected potentials regarding summarizing, generating questions, identifying difficult words and predicting the content of a text. The text talks seemed to encourage deeper levels of thinking which motivated the participants and aided their memory, as illustrated in the data presented. The data in the study also suggest that the text talks helped the participants to actively utilize their potentials. These findings challenge the common perception that reading comprehension is an impossibility for people defined as intellectually disabled. Furthermore, the results of this study lend additional support to the sociocultural paradigm for instruction and remediation (cf. Alfassi et al. 2009). Consequently, reading interventions may in the future prove to function as a tool with application for areas such as social work, social pedagogy and special education to promote social inclusion and integration into society.

Notes

1. DA is intended to offer meaningful activities, social community and increased participation in public life.
2. However, there are mildly intellectually disabled people who decode accurately, but they usually struggle with reading comprehension (Swanson and Trahan 1996; Snowling, Nash and Henderson 2008; Katims 2001; Kay-Raining Bird, Cleave and McConnell 2000).
3. The latest PISA study demonstrated that even non-intellectually disabled people often read texts in a passive way (Skolverket [National Agency for Education] 2010).
4. The authentic version is called 'Julrosen' (*The Christmas Rose*). The easy-to-read text *Julrosen och andra berättelser (The Christmas Rose and Other Short Stories)* is revised by Werkmäster. In this version there are also other short stories by Selma Lagerlöf.
5. The names of the participants are fictitious.

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