

Content-focused literacy coaching markedly more effective in improving student reading comprehension, study finds

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(Phys.org)—The language and reading comprehension skills of low-income upper elementary-school students—especially English-language learners—can improve markedly if trained literacy coaches engage teachers in conducting interactive text discussions with students, according to a three-year University of Pittsburgh study.

The Pitt researchers report in the journal *Learning and Instruction* that language and reading comprehension showed measurable improvement for young [students](#) when their [teachers](#) had worked "at-elbow" with content-specific literacy coaches to foster a more interactive learning environment during class reading assignments.

In the study—one of the first of its kind—the coaches were trained using a professional development system designed at Pitt's Institute for Learning called the Content-Focused Coaching Model® that has coaches provide teachers with the tools they need to implement rigorous, standards-based lessons. Teachers can then use the knowledge they've gained to train other teachers in their schools.

"Our goal was to create a method for closing the literacy gap between more privileged and low-income students," said study principal investigator Lindsay Clare Matsumura, a [research scientist](#) in Pitt's Learning Research and Development Center and an associate professor in Pitt's School of Education. "We found that a well-structured and

content-specific approach to literacy coaching shows strong evidence of being able to really make an impact on classroom text discussion and [reading achievement](#) in these upper elementary grades—a critical time for students to develop their higher-level reading skills."

This content-specific method, developed at Pitt's Institute for Learning within the University's Learning Research and Development Center, also lends itself to adherence of the Common Core State Standards, a national campaign aiming to increase the quality of the country's education system.

"Changing discussion patterns in classrooms is a big undertaking," said Donna DiPrima Bickel, a fellow in Pitt's Institute for Learning and codeveloper and leader of the Content-Focused Coaching Model. "The Common Core State Standards require a broader and deeper level of comprehension from students at all grade levels beyond first grade. It's imperative that teachers learn ways of supporting students to interact effectively with a range of different types of texts. Teachers engaged with coaches trained in the Content-Focused Coaching Model valued the support they received in helping them learn to facilitate text discussion on rigorous texts."

In a group-randomized trial, Matsumura—along with Helen Garnier, a consultant with Pitt's Learning Research and Development Center, and Jessaca Spybrook of Western Michigan University—investigated the effects of the Content-Focused Coaching Model, zeroing in on the quality of text discussions in the classroom.

The researchers worked with 29 schools in a Texas school district that serves a high percentage of low-income and English-language-learning students. Half of the schools adopted the Content-Focused Coaching Model, which entailed highly trained coaches entering schools and providing professional development training to upper elementary school

teachers. The other half continued in their previously assigned literacy plan, which included the involvement of literacy coaches untrained in the coaching model.

"Many literacy coaches don't receive a lot of training on how to work effectively with teachers," said Matsumura. "So our goal was to work intensively with these coaches by teaching them how to model instructional strategies and work with teachers to better plan reading lessons. We provided them with effective strategies to share with teachers so they could boost their engagement with students."

During the study's first year, Pitt researchers collected baseline data on the quality of classroom discussions, teachers' participation in professional development, and students' reading achievement. Soon after, the coaches were placed in schools and began working with teachers on "Questioning the Author," one approach to the Content-Focused Coaching Model in which students answer critical questions about the author and text. "Questioning the Author" was developed at Pitt's Learning Research and Development Center by Emeritus Professor Isabel Beck and Research Scientist Margaret McKeown.

Under this literacy approach, students are asked to stop throughout the reading of a book and answer thought-provoking questions. If a text is written unclearly, said Matsumura, the teacher will pause to make sure students understand what is happening and also review any unknown vocabulary. The approach is meant to result in more interactive discussions leading to better comprehension and retention, and it entails "quite a bit of planning" on the part of teachers for it to be effective, Matsumura said.

In the Pitt study, the coaches began by leading a classroom discussion while teachers observed. After several months of observation, the teachers adopted the technique into their classroom for the rest of the

study. Students' reading scores were evaluated through a series of tests throughout the three years.

The team found that schools participating in the coaching intervention had a positive effect on students' reading achievement—specifically for English-language learners, who made up 40 percent of the study's sample. English-language learners with trained teachers scored .48 of a standard deviation higher on the state reading test than those in the comparison schools. A standard deviation is the average distance between any score in a distribution and the mean of the distribution.

"One of our suppositions is that in having these kinds of interactive discussions, you're really getting kids to talk and learn to use new vocabulary actively," said Matsumura. "Nevertheless, our study highlights the need for usage of literacy-coaching programs—like the Content-Focused Coaching Model—to promote student reading achievement."

In addition to improving students' literacy at an individual level, the study had a larger, across-the-board success.

"Anyone can provide you with an anecdote about how one coach has helped one teacher but the real story here is in the systematic results," said Bickel. "Lindsay and her team retrieved data that clearly show that schools with coaches trained in the Content-Focused Coaching Model improved literacy skills far beyond those where teachers worked with coaches who were not trained in this method. And, as a result of this study, we are able to better describe the components of an effective coaching program."

As is the case with most large-scale projects, widespread implementation of these interventions may prove to be a challenge. Therefore, Matsumura and her colleagues are now working towards delivering this

coaching online.

The paper, "Literacy coaching to improve student reading achievement: A multi-level meditation model," appeared online Dec. 13, 2012, in *Learning and Instruction* and will appear in print June 2013.

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