

Chapter XXII

Using Talking Books to Support Early Reading Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the question of how interactive multimedia talking books can promote young children's literacy development. Whilst commercially available talking books can motivate young children to read, there is little evidence that they are linked to the development of skills known to promote reading itself. The 'Bangers and Mash' talking books (Chera, 2000), were designed to address this issue, and we review studies that evaluated their effectiveness as classroom resources that could promote reading-related skills and abilities. We then consider the various barriers to collaborative learning in Early Years classrooms, and describe how resources like talking books could address some of those issues. The chapter concludes with a research agenda that emphasises the need for software designers to take into account the interpersonal aspects of classroom learning, as well as individual differences in children's knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In the UK there has been a rapid increase in the availability and use of computers in the context of primary school children's classroom activities (Hartley, 2007), which has developed in line with various corporate initiatives, the widespread use of interactive whiteboards (e.g. Martin, 2007), and

most recently the recognition that young children's informal experience with technology has the potential to positively impact on their school learning experiences (e.g. British Educational Communications and Technology Agency, 2007).

This chapter will explore the question of how interactive multimedia talking books can promote young children's literacy development. The dis-

cussion of this question will centre on a review of the use and evaluations of the 'Bangers and Mash' talking books, developed by Chera (2000), which aimed to support the literacy development of beginning readers.

Early Evaluations of Commercially Available Talking Books

Interactive, multimedia talking books are software applications that present children with a storybook-type interface enhanced to enable the computer to 'read aloud' to the children on demand. They often also incorporate 'hotspots' on screen, which enable the children to interact with the illustrations of the book in order to trigger animations or additional activities. Commercially produced talking books have been available since the advent of CD Roms, but whether the use of these applications increases children's reading skills has been debated in the academic literature. That is, whilst there is no doubt that use of such software improves children's computer literacy and helps to develop their understanding of texts and narratives (Davies & O'Sullivan, 2002), there is little evidence that their potential to improve children's reading attainment has been realised (Underwood, 2002).

One of the first attempts to evaluate commercially available talking books was that of Miller, Blackstock and Miller (1994), who compared four children on their repeated reading of both talking books and regular storybooks. Although they noted some benefits of the talking books in terms of reducing reading errors based on searching for meaning, they expressed some caution about children's use of talking books, advising that their optimal use in the classroom may involve teachers observing the children's use of the software and making notes for future instruction with the child.

A similar message emerges from the work of Jane Medwell (1996, 1998) who compared children's use of commercial talking books and their

paper equivalents, and also built in a comparison between talking books that were based on 'real' storybooks relative to ones based on books from reading schemes. Like Miller et al. (1994), she too concluded that best progress was made in the condition where the children were using the talking book with the support of a teacher. Moreover, Medwell reported that while the children who used talking books showed improved story recall relative to the paper storybooks, there was little evidence of improvement in the children's word reading ability when the words were presented out of context. However, she speculated that talking books could have the potential to support young boys' reading development given the observation from the 1996 study that the boys showed greater increases than the girls in their word reading accuracy following contact with the talking books: "it seems that any reading technology which is advantageous to boys might well be a welcome addition to classroom practice" (Medwell, 1996, p45).

Researcher-Designed Approaches to Computer-Based Reading Tuition

So, the research into commercially available talking books suggests that they were most effective when teachers were involved in how the children worked with them. Despite limited evidence of their impact on reading skills, there was still positive discussion of their potential, which was reiterated by Cathy Lewin's (1998) survey into teachers' views of talking books. She found that the teachers recognised the potential of the speech feedback aspect of talking books to develop reading skills and suggested in particular that in future such software incorporate speech feedback at the onset-rime level (e.g. st-art), and provide reinforcement activities.

This request for sub-word speech feedback was consistent with research by Wise et al. (1989), which had explored the utility of specially-designed talking books to support the reading

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