



Questioning the Author: English Language Teachers' Perspectives

Jessie Png

English Language and Literature Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Received 1st June 2016, Revised 2nd June 2016, Accepted 5th June 2016, Published 1st July 2016

Abstract: Questioning the Author (QtA) is an approach used to teach reading comprehension. Americans Beck and McKeown tried it out in the 1990s and found it to be effective in getting children to discuss what the author had to say about the text they were reading. This paper focuses on a study conducted in a non-western country. It involved teachers in a particular Singaporean primary school who were introduced to QtA, a teaching tool which they were not familiar with. This paper discusses the responses of the first batch of these teachers in that school who tried out QtA with their classes. The transcripts of their interviews and their written reflections show that once they had undergone the lesson planning and practice sessions, and the actual teaching of QtA lessons, their approach to teaching reading comprehension changed. The change also came about because the teacher-participants saw the benefits QtA had on their students who came from multilingual backgrounds. This study shows that QtA can work for countries in the East too, that teachers' mind-set can be changed with time and professional support.

Keywords: Questioning the Author; Reading Comprehension

1. INTRODUCTION

Many reading experts in the West have come up with different methods for English Language teachers to use to enhance their students' comprehension during reading. However, the Initiate-Response-Evaluate (IRE) approach is still popularly used in countries like Singapore, and presumably in other countries in the East. IRE is a questioning approach whereby the teacher initiates a question, a student responds to that question, and the teacher then evaluates if the answer is right or wrong (Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, & Smith, 1966). This kind of questioning practice is "more like a recitation (Stodolsky, Ferguson, & Wimpelberg, 1981) than like the give-and-take dialogue that Bridges (1979) and others call discussion" (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990, p. 298). One of the methods to teach reading that goes beyond students merely retrieving information, promotes discussions and higher-order thinking is Questioning the Author (QtA) (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan & Worthy, 1996). QtA promotes collaboration and discussion while students read a text (Gunning, 2010). Students are given opportunities to think critically about the text. In this paper, the author will present a part of a 3-year intervention study done with a group of English Language primary (elementary) school teachers in a Singaporean school. The research team introduced QtA to

the teachers so that they can inject more discussions in their reading lessons, so that the students can negotiate for meaning as they discuss the reading texts. The responses of these teachers to the use of this new teaching instrument will also be discussed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Teaching of Reading in Singapore*

In a small-scale research in eight primary schools in Singapore, Wong (2006, 2007) found that the teachers tended to use the school's prescribed textbooks very closely, and then used the IRE approach to elicit responses from their students. At the end of the lessons, students would complete worksheets. Critical analysis skills were hardly looked into (Wong, 2007). Wong's was not the only research with such a finding. Skuja-Steele and Silver (2004, 2005) also found this to be so in mid-primary English Language lessons in Singapore.

In a pilot study of reading comprehension at Primary 4 level, done at the same school in the research presented in this paper, the research team found that "teacher-fronted interactions predominated, although group work was used; there was an emphasis on answering worksheet questions, with little if any meaningful, authentic, or



sustained student talk” (Foong, Png, Raslinda, & Silver, 2009, p. 3). This approach to teaching reading comprehension mirrored the ones mentioned in the above studies. This was one of the reasons for an intervention study to be carried out in this school. The research team aimed to help the teachers in this school to promote more discussions in reading comprehension lessons by getting the students to negotiate for meaning as they interact with the reading texts. After all, reading “involves both reconstructing an author’s message and constructing one’s own meaning using the print on the page” (Hayes, 1991, p. 7). The teaching instrument QtA allows students to do just that, and hence, it was chosen for this research.

B. *Questioning the Author*

QtA is an “approach to comprehension instruction” which “focused on the importance of students’ active efforts to build meaning from what they read and the need for students to grapple with ideas in a text” (Beck & McKeown, 2006, p. 8). Beck, McKeown and Worthy (1993) wanted to, through QtA, “create an entrée to text ideas by guiding students to think of the meaning of a text as something to be negotiated, as if setting up a dialogue with the text’s author” (p. 560). Students are to see that the content of a text is merely a collection of ideas written down by the author, and that these ideas may be unclear or incomplete. It is hoped that that will make texts “less intimidating” to students (Beck & McKeown, 2002, p. 44). In other words, students are to see the author as fallible.

In QtA, as students read a text, “the teacher intervenes at selected points and poses queries to prompt students to consider the information in the text. Queries drive discussion and keep it focused on meaning” (Beck & McKeown, 2002, p. 44). There are two types of queries that can be employed with either narrative or expository text. They are initiating and follow-up queries. Examples of initiating queries which are used to start off students’ thinking of important ideas in the text are:

- What is the author trying to say?
- What is the author’s message?
(Alvermann & Phelps, 2002, p. 225)

Examples of follow-up queries which are generated to help students evaluate, link ideas and make meanings are:

- Does the author explain this clearly?
- Does the author tell us why?
- How does this connect to what the author told us before?
(Alvermann & Phelps, 2002, p. 225)

QtA can be carried out using six discussion moves: “marking, turning back, revoicing, modeling, annotating and recapping” (Gunning, 2010, p. 350). In ‘marking’, the teacher singles out a student’s comment or idea that is

pertinent to the construction of meaning in the text. In ‘turning back’, the teacher re-directs students’ attention to the text in order for them to attain more information, repair a misreading, or clarify a point. In ‘revoicing’, the teacher re-phrases students’ statements. In ‘modeling’, the teacher demonstrates how he or she constructs meaning from the text. In ‘annotating’, the teacher fills up any information gap that has resulted from a discussion; it might be an information missed out by the author. Finally, in ‘recapping’, the teacher summarises the main points of the text (Gunning, 2010). These moves need not take place in any particular order.

The use of QtA has reaped results. In an instructional intervention research using QtA involving fourth grade students in a social studies and a reading/language arts classes, Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy (1996) found that the amount of student-talk more than doubled in the reading/language arts class and tripled in the social studies one. Over the one year of research, “students’ remarks became more complex” (p. 401), and the students “were listening to their peers and responding to them in a spirit of collaboration” (p. 402). In a more recent research conducted by Sencibaugh and Sencibaugh (2015), it was found that QtA had “significantly improved the reading comprehension of eighth grade students when implemented systematically and taught explicitly” (p. 91).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. *Background*

The research discussed in this paper refers to a three-year intervention study on Primary (Grades) 3, 4, 5 reading in a school. Prior to this research, there was a pilot study conducted in the same school to test out the teaching materials and the plans for the QtA lessons.

The three-year study involved three generations of teachers, that is, in the second year, another group of teachers joined in the study and in the third year, yet another group of teachers joined in. The Generation 1 teachers had to lead the Generation 2 teachers in lesson planning and discussions in the second year, and then the Generation 2 teachers had to lead the Generation 3 teachers the following year. This paper will only focus on the Generation 1 teachers.

The research team comprised a Principal Investigator (PI) and a Co-PI who are academic staff from the National Institute of Education; two Research Associates who were primary school teachers attached to the Institute, and two Research Assistants. The two Research Associates helped out with the training, interview and lesson planning sessions, while the Research Assistants did the video-recording, taking down of field notes, and other administrative matters.

B. Subjects

For the purpose of this paper, the author who was the Co-PI, will only focus on the first two years of the research. In the first year, six teachers teaching English Language participated in the study. Five of them had more than eight years of teaching then, and one had only half a year of service. In total they taught six classes of 235 students with various linguistic backgrounds. These teachers volunteered to be part of the project.

C. Methodology

In the first two months of the research, the teacher-participants underwent six training sessions on QtA. They read and discussed the articles on QtA, and watched the researchers modelled the use of QtA. Concurrently in the second month, the teachers were being observed teaching their regular lessons and were interviewed after their lessons.

In the subsequent months they were shown a QtA lesson which was planned and used by the research team during the pilot study and had a discussion on the lesson plan. The following two months they planned their first QtA lesson in their teams, according to the level they taught. Once that was done there were practice lessons whereby one teacher per team taught their lessons. The rest of the teacher-participants and the research team role-played the part of students. These sessions were video-recorded. After each teacher-participant had taught, time was set aside for reflections from those who taught and for feedback from fellow teacher-participants and the research team. Once the refinement of the lessons taught was done, the teacher-participants then carried out their lessons with their classes. Their lessons were video-recorded so that one of the researchers could meet with the individual teacher-participant to go through the lesson taught. The teacher-participant would be led to reflect on her/his lesson. For the rest of the year, two more QtA lesson plans were prepared and the procedure mentioned above was repeated. Table 1 shows the sequence of the activities mentioned above. In Year 2, the teacher-participants continued to prepare lessons in their teams and taught them. They needed not have the lesson practice sessions if they did not require them. They also played leadership roles in Year 2 but this will not be discussed in this paper.

D. Data Collection

For the purpose of this paper, the discussion of findings will be based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews with the teacher-participants in the second month of the research, after their second training session had taken place. One of the purposes of this interview was to analyse how much they had learnt from the training session. Their written reflections eight months after research intervention, and their reflections written in Year 2 after they had conducted their regular reading or fifth QtA lessons were also used as data. Data collected

from the teacher-participant with only half a year of service will not be used in this paper.

TABLE 1 : PROCEDURE (YEAR 1)

Months	Activities
Jan-Feb	6 training sessions on QtA (reading of articles on QtA; demonstration of QtA)
Feb	Lesson (regular) observations and interviews after lessons Critique on QtA lesson planned and used by Research team
Mar-Apr	Lesson planning (QtA) – team work
May	Lesson practice 1 (QtA) (video-taped) –critique -- reflections
Jul	Lesson 1 (QtA) (video-taped) – observed, interviewed Lesson planning for QtA lesson 2
Aug	Lesson practice 2 (QtA) (video-taped) –critique -- reflections
Sept	Lesson 2 (QtA) (video-taped) – observed, interviewed
End Sept- Oct	Lesson planning for QtA lesson 3

4. FINDINGS

A. Start-of-Research Interview

For the first two months of the research, the teacher-participants underwent training on QtA. After the second training session, they were interviewed individually. Among the questions asked during the semi-structured interview were: “What do you already know of QtA? Is that what you have learned from the first two meetings we had or did you already know about QtA?” .

Yvonne (the teacher-participants’ names are pseudonyms), who had thirty years of teaching experience, said that QtA is used to “understand the text better”; “to comprehend what is written, then ultimately [for students] to answer the comprehension questions”. It is interesting to note that Yvonne had nothing much to say though she had gone through two of the training sessions. However, it is not surprising that she still clung on to the traditional idea of teaching reading comprehension, that is, to teach so that students could answer the comprehension questions that are likely to be found in the worksheets. Like Yvonne, Carol (13 years in the service) had not much to say except that from the “title of this strategy ... we question the author ... ‘Why this is written in this manner?’”.

Alison (15 years in the service) said that QtA is “quite spontaneous”; “there’s still a need for some kind of preparation”; “the teacher has to be trained ... to respond, to ask the proper questions because ... we always try to ask the proper questions that will relate to ... factual questions”; “We are assuming that the author is not perfect, which is usually not the case. We will say



that 'Oh they are always right. You better know what is the answer' ... which I think is quite suitable for our children, especially those who are not very good at English ... like my class is a very average class".

Brian (13 years in the service) and Anita (9 years in the service), like Alison, were also struck by the feature that in QtA, it is assumed that the author is fallible. The teachers found this aspect a positive point for their students as it would make them think that they might not be weak should they not understand certain parts of the reading text.

The above views of these teacher-participants on QtA will be compared to their reflections written at the different stages of the research intervention to see if the views had changed.

B. Written Reflections (8 months into intervention)

Eight months into the intervention, the teacher-participants were given some questions to reflect upon. One of the questions was: "Has participation in this project changed my way of teaching in lessons other than the ones with the prepared plans [QtA lessons]?"

All of the five teacher-participants gave affirmative answers to the above question. According to Alison, "When it comes to questioning technique, I am asking more 'open' questions and allowing the pupils to help one another answer/respond to the discussions. At different points I am able to assess pupils' understandings and re-emphasise them rather than wait till the end of the lessons". It is worthy to note that Alison had come to realise that she needed not rely on students doing worksheets after the reading lesson to assess her students' comprehension of the text. She had disputed the traditional belief of many Singaporean English Language teachers that having students do worksheets is the best form of assessing students' understanding of a reading text.

Brian had also begun to ask more open-ended questions and had had his students to discuss more. He found that "the discussions became more interesting and fruitful and the pupils were more participative". The most striking change was that he also transformed the way he questioned pupils, "even for Maths and Science". Being able to apply the strategies learnt for English Language teaching to other subjects is an accomplishment for the teacher-participant and a success for the research team.

Anita had similarly given her students more opportunities to discuss with their peers and also with her. As a result, her lessons had become livelier. She also tapped on students' prior knowledge in relation to the

text and had them share that knowledge with their classmates.

In the Start-of-Research interview, Yvonne regarded QtA as a tool to help students "understand the text better" so as "to answer the comprehension questions". In this reflection, she stated that she had begun to teach comprehension "without looking at the questions first. It is alright that not everything can be clearly explained. It is alright to throw the questions back to the pupils to answer them". She also began to "get pupils to talk and question the texts, to clarify when in doubt". This is definitely a shift in paradigm for Yvonne. It is not easy for a teacher who had been in control of her classroom discourse for thirty years to let go of that control. However, there were still two things she would not change: explaining "the main ideas in each paragraph" and "the meaning of the vocabulary words". It is understandable for her to still hold on to what she believed to have worked for her students all these years; after all, she was only exposed to QtA for eight months and taught only two QtA lessons at this point in time.

Carol had nothing much to say about QtA in the Start-of-Research interview except that in QtA one questions the author. In this reflection she wrote: "I find that other than using QtA for my EL lessons, I occasionally get pupils to ask: 'Why is this Science concept written in this manner? So, is it clear?'". Evidently, Carol was applying QtA to her Science lesson. Like Yvonne, she also held on to certain habits – getting her students to "summarise the main ideas of paragraphs" and "use annotations [make notes] when they are answering the questions". She still believed that "these skills are needed or will be useful during examinations". As a teacher who had been in the Singaporean examination-oriented educational scene for thirteen years, it is not unexpected for her to still think of helping her students do well in their examinations. Incidentally, in QtA, summarising is one of the moves made by the teacher but in Carol's case, it was done by her students. Hence, Carol was not far off from using QtA in that aspect.

C. Written Reflections on Reading/QtA lesson (Year 2)

After conducting their regular reading or fifth QtA lesson, the teacher-participants were given a reflection sheet. Among the questions, the ones on the overall lesson to reflect on were:

- a). What are the main things that you remember about the lesson? (What was happening at those points?)
- b) Why are those points memorable?



c) In what way(s) might those points change your thinking about the lesson? QtA? Teaching reading comprehension?

All the teacher-participants chose to reflect on their QtA lessons. By Year 2, the number of Generation 1 teachers was reduced by one as Yvonne had left the school then. Below are the reflections of the remaining teacher-participants:

Brian: "I do sincerely feel that QtA is the way to go for reading lessons. It really encourages interactions and discussions among pupils and teachers ... The teacher in a QtA lesson really becomes a facilitator and does not just spoon-feed his pupils. The pupils will be trained to think independently and make enquiries of their own".

Carol: I am positive that given time, I would like to explore texts using QtA and bring them [students] to whole new dimension of reflective thinking and analysing.

Anita: Teaching this QtA lesson was good for this passage [reading text] because it gets me and the kids to think beyond what is written, i.e. to read in between the lines. When I was coming up with the major understandings for each chunk, I was wondering if they would be too difficult for the pupils, but it seemed like they got it. My confidence in teaching a good QtA lesson is still 75%. For most times, I think I am still wondering whether or not I have done things the 'right way'. I suppose there is no other way of gaining confidence other than reading, watching and conducting more QtA lessons.

Alison: QtA is one strategy which allows pupils to see the text as authentically an expression of the author and not just a mere text to read. Therefore, it is natural not to understand certain ideas... Instead pupils are encouraged to clarify through questioning. However, the challenge for me as a facilitator is to be patient and listen to every pupil's response and to figure out any misunderstanding. Responding to the pupils' answers so as to make clarification and not going off track is also quite a task for me.

All the four teacher-participants had positive feedback on QtA. As compared to what they knew about QtA during the Start-of-Research Interview, they were definitely more knowledgeable as to what QtA was all about at this point in the second year of the intervention. Brian was already positive about QtA when he wrote his reflections mentioned in Section 4B of this paper, and he

was again very supportive of the use of QtA in this particular reflection. Equally positive in this reflection was Carol. Carol had made great progress in the span of two years. She started off having nothing much to say about QtA but one year later she definitely knew more about it and saw the value of this approach of teaching. Initially, she was not confident that she could handle her students' spontaneous responses to the QtA queries because she was more comfortable with the IRE approach but at this point of the research, she was excited about her students posing queries about the texts. The observations of her lessons confirmed her improvement too.

Anita wrote in her reflections mentioned in Section 4B that she allowed for discussions in her class and again in this reflection it could be inferred that she got her students to think and discuss the text again. However, she still lacked confidence in teaching reading using the QtA approach. This is a point for all education practitioners who want to embark on professional development to take note. To fully embrace a new teaching method takes time and support.

Alison mentioned some of her challenges. These challenges are real especially for a teacher, like many others, who was used to the IRE approach of questioning. Time management is also an aspect to look into for a QtA lesson, but it will become better with experience.

5. DISCUSSION

One of the purposes of this research was to introduce to the teacher-participants QtA so that they could inject more discussions into their reading lessons and that the students in turn could negotiate for meaning as they discussed the reading texts. The findings of this study had proven that after using QtA in their lessons, the teacher-participants did generate more discussions between them and their students, and among the students too. They had also encouraged the students to think at a higher level.

In this study, QtA had positive outcomes on students in the non-western part of the world where students are seemingly quieter and less responsive than their counterparts in the west. It had also worked well for students who were weak in the English Language and who came from multilingual backgrounds. Alison's class was a case in point. Alison thought that letting her students know that the author was not perfect would boost the students' confidence in their reading ability. Her weak students indeed gained confidence in speaking up so much so that she found it a challenge to be patient to listen to their responses. This parallels the response of a fourth-grade teacher whom McKeown, Beck and



Worthy worked with. She was delighted to see that during her lessons, the discussions were “being led mostly by two students who were the lowest achievers in her class” (McKeown, Beck, & Worthy, 1993, p. 565). That teacher believed that QtA had helped “previously unreachable students to become engaged in reading and discussion” (McKeown, et al., 1993, p. 565).

If QtA works for the English Language lessons, it can also work for lessons conducted in other languages. As a matter of fact, it can also be carried out in other subjects. Teacher-participant Brian employed some of the QtA queries and moves in his Mathematics and Science lessons, and Carol tried that in her Science lessons. Beck, McKeown and her team experimented QtA with a Social Studies class.

Implementing new teaching methods comes with its challenges. In the second year of this study, teacher-participant Anita still required more confidence in teaching a “good” QtA lesson while teacher-participant Alison found it a challenge to be patient to listen to her students’ responses and to address them. She also found it difficult not to go “off track”. These teachers had the advantage of having the time and space to sharpen their skills in using QtA because the research was for three years and after that they had their professional learning communities (PLCs) or groups to give each other support. The author and her research team found that for the learning and implementation of any new teaching methodology to be sustainable, the teacher-participants require support. Working in teams which these teacher-participants did, gave them the encouragement and motivation to stay on in this project. In this particular school, there was time set aside for professional development. These teacher-participants were allowed to use the sessions with the researchers to replace their regular professional learning community meetings. Once the three-year project ended, these teachers could go to their PLCs to continue to share their QtA lessons. These teachers also had the ‘expert’ body which was the research team to mentor them when they trialed their QtA lessons. An important support that these teachers also received was the endorsement of their involvement in this project by their school principal. For schools who want to adopt QtA, or other new approaches into their reading curriculum, a one-off workshop for teachers on this new approach may not yield long-time result. Relevant support is crucial to the success of the implementation of the new teaching instrument. Very often, “too many innovations disappear at the first sign of trouble if that support fades after one or two sessions” (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1996, p. 412).

6. CONCLUSION

The author of this paper has presented the views of the teachers who had planned and carried out QtA lessons over a period of two years. These teachers had testified to the benefits of using QtA, an approach that was new to them, to analyse the author’s ideas in texts. They witnessed their students reading the texts more closely and discussing more than they did before the research. These teachers had gone beyond the IRE approach of teaching reading comprehension. They had also proven that a teaching instrument originated from the West can be used in non-western classrooms.

Acknowledgment

This research project was funded by the Office of Educational Research, National Institute of Education, Singapore.

REFERENCES

- Alvermann, D. E., O’Brien, D. G., & Dillon, D. R. (1990). What teachers do when they say they’re having discussions of content area reading assignments: A qualitative analysis. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 25(4), 296-322.
- Alvermann, D. E., & Phelps, S. F. (2002). *Content reading and literacy*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (2002). Questioning the author: Making sense of social studies. *Educational Leadership*, 60(3), 44-47.
- Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (2006). *Improving comprehension with questioning the author: A fresh and expanded view of a powerful approach*. New York: Scholastic.
- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Sandora, C., Kucan, L., & Worthy, J. (1996). Questioning the Author: A yearlong classroom implementation to engage students with text. *The Elementary School Journal*, 96(4), 385-414.
- Bellack, A. A., Kliebard, H. M., Hyman, R. T., & Smith, F. L., Jr. (1966). *The language of the classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Foong, P. Y., Png, J. L. H., Raslinda, A. R., & Silver, R. E. (2009). Questioning the Author: Primary school students’ perceptions. In *Educational Research Association of Singapore, 2009: Unpacking teaching and learning through educational research*, (pp. 17). Singapore: Educational Research Association of Singapore.
- Gunning, T. G. (2010). *Creating literacy: Instruction for all students*. USA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Hayes, B. (1991). The effective teaching of reading. In B. L. Hayes (Ed.), *Effective strategies for teaching reading* (pp. 3-12). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.



- McKeown, M. G., & Beck, I. L., & Worthy, M. J. (1993). Grappling with text ideas: Questioning the Author. *The Reading Teacher*, 46(70), 560-566.
- Sencibaugh, J. M., & Sencibaugh, A. M. (2015). The effects of Questioning the Author on the reading comprehension of middle school students. *Reading Improvement*, 52(3), 85-92.
- Silver, R., & Skuja-Steele, R. (2005). Priorities in English Language education policy and classroom implementation. *Language Policy*, 34, 107-128.
- Skuja-Steele, R., & Silver, R. E. (2004). Pedagogical practices in English language education. In N. McGinn (Ed.), *Learning through collaborative research: The six nation education research project* (pp. 53-90). New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Wong, Y. L. R. (2006). Describing and improving the teaching of reading in Singapore primary schools. *Final Research Report for Project No. CRP 18/03 AL & CRP 19/03 AL*. Singapore: Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice, National Institute of Education,
- Wong, Y. L. R. (2007). Reading is usually a passage followed by a set of questions for the kids: Primary 3 reading lessons in Singapore. In V. Vaish, S. Gopinathan & Y. Liu (Eds.), *Language, capital, culture: Critical studies of language in education in Singapore* (pp. 103-116). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

