ROBUST COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION WITH QUESTIONING THE AUTHOR: 15 YEARS SMARTER

Book review[1]

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Abstract

This text reviews the handbook, Robust Comprehension with Questioning the Author 15 years smarter by I. Beck, M.G. McKeown & C. Sandora (2021). The review discusses the value and quality of the book. The text argues that the book makes an important contribution to the literature because (a) it rests on solid scientific grounds and (b) theoretically it is positioned within applied cognitive psychology in educational and reading research. Thus, the book is highly recommended to a wide readership.

Keywords: text talk, reading comprehension strategies, cognitive psychology, reading instruction
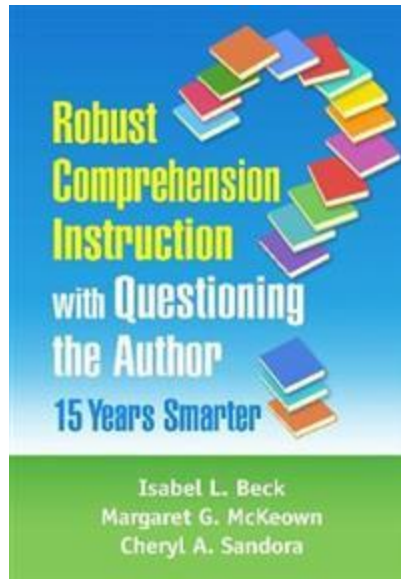
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[1] *An abbreviated review in Swedish will be published in* Acta Didactica Norden*.*

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Sandora, C. A. (2021). *Robust Comprehension Instruction with Questioning the Author: 15 Years Smarter*. Guilford Press.

Researchers agree that reading instruction matters for a child's reading development (e.g., Afflerbach, 2013; Allington 2013; Pearson, 2009; Snow, 2002). Reading instruction starts with teaching children to read and to understand what they read. Several studies have been concerned with the efficiency of teachers' strategies in assisting students' reading comprehension (e.g., Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Pressley et al., 1992).

One of the most useful ways of teaching reading comprehension is teacher-led text talk in small groups or in whole class. Text talk refers to teachers´ and students´ collaborative talk about texts (Beck & McKeown, 2006; Guthrie et al., 1996; Nystrand, 2006). One of the most well-researched types of text talk is Questioning the Author (QtA) developed by Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Cheryl Sandora, all from the University of Pittsburgh. In several peer reviewed articles the authors report about intervention studies where QtA have been tested (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 2002; Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan & Worthy, 1996; McKeown, Beck & Worthy, 1993). In 2006 the authors published a book about QtA and now there is a revised version of this book.

The book is a monograph, more precisely a handbook for primary and secondary teachers. The title of the book is *Robust Comprehension Instruction with Questioning the Author: 15 Years Smarter*, which refers to all that the authors have learned with and from teachers since the publication of the first QtA book in 2006 (Beck & McKeown, 2006). The authors ask how teachers can develop effective instruction for

reading comprehension. For the revised version, the authors developed the content in light of long-term work with teachers in classrooms. The authors: observed 3000 QtA lessons, met with teachers and provided feedback, and took note of specific problems, comments, and interviewed students.

Readers should take care to avoid conflating QtA with "participatory action research". In contrast to "participatory action research", QtA follows an experimental field approach to classroom research. Equivalently, the approach also has been labelled "intervention studies". As part of the experimental design, the authors conducted pre- and post-test analyses to evaluate the QtA model, putting the model to the test. The experimental field approach is—what I would argue—the authors first important contribution to the literature.

A common criticism of experimental approaches in the European context concerns the lack of integration with educational or developmental theories and it is often unclear what theory is being tested (Pressley, Graham & Harris, 2006; Seidel & Shavelson, 2007). In response, the authors elaborate their theoretical framework; identifying the cognitive mechanism of QtA that explains why QtA promotes reading development. In this way the authors outline an information processing model of reading development. Thus, the authors outline what I consider their second important contribution to the literature.

The authors position QtA within applied cognitive psychology in educational and reading research. Somewhat simplified: the main premise being that successful comprehension requires actively processing of text—attending to information and connecting it as one reads (p.3). Meaning that QtA fosters readers' active interpretation of texts. Applied cognitive psychology has a strong history in American educational research and perhaps reading research in general (e.g., Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1978). However, European readers may not be as familiar with the ideas due to the overwhelming popularity of sociocultural theories. For European readers this should be a pleasant surprise and enjoyment to read about an alternative approach to integrate theory with research and hands on didactical examples for teachers.

The book consists of 12 chapters. Chapters 2, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12 are new while the other chapters are updated. Chapter 1 explains the basic elements of the QtA approach. A key feature in QtA is to help students understand that a text is a collection of ideas written by a fallible author; therefore, the text may be ambiguous or incomplete. In this way, QtA makes texts less intimidating to students and encourages them to think critically while they read. Led by the teacher, students read the text segment by segment and discuss the content. During a QtA lesson, the teacher poses Initiating and Follow-up Queries to build students' understanding of a text during reading. The chapter also discusses the two dominant approaches to comprehension instruction: strategies and content (QtA). A common feature of the two approaches is that they aim to promote active student engagement with reading. Although, according to the authors (p. 20), there is a major distinction between the two approaches.

Strategies instruction generally consists of teaching students specific strategies such as summarizing, drawing inferences, and predicting (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Pressley et al., 1992). Initially, teachers guide students to understand the strategies by thinking aloud, i.e. verbalize the strategies (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Pressley et al., 1992).

The content instruction attempts to engage students in the process of attending to text ideas and building a mental representation of the ideas, with no direction to consider specific mental processes. The authors explain that: "In our experience, strategy instruction has an inherent potential drawback, in that the attention of teachers and students can too easily be drawn to the mechanics of the strategies themselves rather than to the content of what is being read "(p. 5). In a two-year study the effectiveness of the two approaches and a control approach were compared. The content instruction approach focused student attention on the content of the text through open, meaning-based questions. In the strategies instruction approach, students were taught specific procedures to guide their access to the text during reading. The results were consistent from Year 1 to Year 2. For narrative recall and expository learning probes, content students outperformed strategies students (McKeown, Beck & Blake, 2009).

Chapter 2 explores current topics and foci in reading comprehension. Chapter 3 explains the particular planning process for QtA lessons and chapter 4 provides specific plans for a narrative and an expository text. Chapter 5 elaborates on Queries and how they differ from other question types. Queries are text based and open questions. By "open," the authors mean that "a Query does not provide much directive information about what a correct response should be." (p. 8). The authors refer to Queries as either Initiating or Follow-Up. While the goals of Initiating Queries are to make public what the author has presented and to start discussion, the goal of Follow-Up Queries is "to focus discussion once it is under way by encouraging students to elaborate and integrate ideas" (p. 54). Chapter 6 describes how QtA can be used with young readers and Chapter 7 presents options for prompting final discussion and reflection following a QtA lesson.

Chapters 8 and 9 demonstrate how to integrate vocabulary and writing in a QtA lesson. Highlighting the QtA/writing connection transmits to students that reading and writing are two sides of the same coin, and that insight can enhance both the reading and writing processes. When it comes to vocabulary the goal for "better" instruction is to "develop flexible and multifaceted representations of target words" (p. 99). The authors state "Over the years we have come to call this kind of instruction robust instruction because it is strong and energetic" (p. 99). A shortened version of the range of components of robust instruction is also provided. The authors present evidence to show the effectiveness of robust instruction for students at all levels by referring to experiments/studies they have conducted (e.g., McKeown & Beck, 2014).

Central in QtA is also teachers´ use of Discussion moves "actions that teachers take to assist in orchestrating student ideas and making on-the-spot decisions toward the goal of building meaning." (p. 129). The authors have identified six QtA Discussion Moves: Marking, Turning Back (to students or to text), Revoicing, Recapping, Modelling, and Annotating. Chapter 10 provides us with several examples of each of the discussion moves.

In Chapter 11, "One Teacher's Journey with Questioning the Author", a teacher´s growth in QtA is shown and discussed. The authors conclude that when teachers are new to the QtA planning process (a) Initiating Queries tend to be too leading, (b) teachers provide too much information in the discussions—"helpful teacher syndrome"—and (c) teachers collect too many comments from the students. As teachers progress, "they become more skilled at asking Follow-Up Queries that encourage students to carry the cognitive load and build on others´ responses." (p. 158).

QtA aims at fostering independent readers. Consequently, Chapter 12 discusses whether QtA leads to enhanced independent comprehension of texts. The discussion includes a sequence on how to move students from teacher-led whole-class text talk (discussions) to student-led discussions in small groups. Finally, all the 12 chapters offer several examples.

What would I have liked to read more of? Well, this is a wonderful book and I was sold on the book before I have reached the final pages, but I still believe that there is room for improvement. First, the authors could have elaborated on socioeconomic context of reading. Reading comprehension varies across the student population, e.g. students with low socioeconomic status, immigrant background, ethnic minorities, or disabilities. Students from low-income and low-educated families usually face many barriers to reading. Less household wealth often results into fewer educational resources, such as books and other learning materials in the home. In agreement with Slavin (2011) I strongly believe methods like QtA benefit those students´ reading development the most. For example, in the above-mentioned longitudinal study (McKeown, Beck & Blake, 2009) the authors showed how QtA benefits students reading in highly socioeconomic disadvantaged schools. However, this is not mentioned in the book.

Second, since QtA has a cognitive foundation, it would have been interesting to read if QtA could be integrated with sociocognitive theories (e.g., Bandura, 1986). For instance, what is the relationship between QtA and reading self-efficacy? Other reading comprehension programmes such as concept-oriented reading (CORI) already acknowledges self-efficacy. CORI cites self-efficacy as an indicator of reading motivation and as a mediator of reading comprehension (Guthrie et al., 1996). Thus the extension to QtA seems logical. Beyond self-efficacy, I certainly wonder what other sociocognitive concepts could be extended to QtA (e.g. goals/aspirations, outcome expectations, socio-structural, and self-regulation). Socio-cognitive psychology has strong affinities with the cognitive psychology but introduces the social dimensions. The emphasis on peoples' capabilities distinguishes socio-cognitive psychology from the Neo-Vygotskian or Neo-Piagetian (Martin, 2004)

found in other approaches to reading comprehension, e.g. Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

Who should read this book? The book targets a wide readership. The book´s reader friendly style makes it approachable for bachelor students in educational research, teacher training, pre-service teachers, and professional development. Special education teachers will find concrete advice for how to help struggling readers and writers. Actually, I think it should be a mandatory reading for special education teachers. However, the authors have bits even for the experienced reading researchers and graduate students working on reading research. The book would be a perfect illustration of the applied cognitive psychology in educational research for a graduate course. I strongly recommend the book to anyone interested in or conducting reading research. The writing is excellent. The book is timely, thought provoking, hands-on, theoretically sound, and empirically-based. Educational research at its best.

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