

THE USE OF COMPLEX READING MATERIALS IN FIRST GRADE: INFLUENCES ON STUDENTS' COMPREHENSION IN DISADVANTAGED SUBURBAN FRENCH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Teachers in France tend to use complex reading materials as supplements for instruction. The present study explores the relationship between such materials, teachers' instructional choices, and students' reading comprehension, focusing on disadvantaged schools. We combined detailed analyses of two books taught to first grade students with classroom observations and assessments of students' comprehension. Although the two books appear simple, they include a number of aspects that complicate their comprehension by children. The teacher dedicated a lot of instructional time to the books and used a wide variety of approaches, including prediction and comprehension discussions, to support children's understanding of the texts. Nevertheless, many students failed to understand important aspects of the stories. Analyses of oral interactions revealed how activities such as prediction led to misunderstandings, and why these misunderstandings persisted in many students' minds. Prediction and comprehension discussions are recommended techniques that are used by many teachers. However, our study shows that these techniques can be counter-productive when they are used with complex reading materials with disadvantaged students and when teaching practices engender metacognitive confusion. Our findings challenge the use of complex reading materials with disadvantaged classes, and question the consequences of doing so in terms of educational equity.

Keywords: comprehension; literacy; primary school; reading material

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1. INTRODUCTION

International literacy studies have shown that many students fail to develop adequate *literacy* skills (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012; OECD, 2010). This is a major challenge for education systems, especially the French system, as students' results have deteriorated slightly in recent decades. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) was set up in 2001 by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in order to carry out five-yearly assessments of reading comprehension by fourth graders around the world. In 2011, French students achieved a mean score of 520, which is below the European average of 534. Compared with students in neighbouring countries, French students are overrepresented in the weakest group, and underrepresented in the strongest group. Over the ten years of the PIRLS (2001-2011), the mean scores for French students remained steady in the case of less demanding skills such as "retrieving explicitly stated information" and "making straightforward inferences", but decreased substantially in the case of more complex skills such as "interpreting and integrating ideas and information" and "examining and evaluating content, language, and textual elements" (IEA, 2012). In addition, the Pisa surveys, which assess the performance of 15-year-old students in 34 OECD countries, have shown that the impact of social background on student performance is greater in France than in any other European country and that the effect of social determinism is stronger in France than in other OECD countries (OECD, 2010).

Underachievement has been attributed to differences in language development at home (Hart & Risley, 2003; Lahire, 2008), with not all students starting school with the same linguistic and language resources, or the same relationship to language and school.¹ However, far from reducing inequalities, school seems to worsen them through processes our team is trying to decipher (Bautier & Rayou, 2009; Rochex & Crinon, 2011). The present paper examines the connection between these inequalities and the use of complex reading materials in disadvantaged schools.

Recent years have seen substantial changes in the types of materials used for early reading instruction. Although basal readers are widely used as a basis for reading instruction, teachers in France tend to prefer complex reading materials, rather than basal texts or leveled readers, as supplements for instruction (e.g. Bonnéry 2010; Quet, 2009). This trend has been encouraged by an academic dogma according to which early confrontation with literature and complex texts develops comprehension skills (Tauveron, 1999). The notion of "resisting texts", which can be defined as complex texts whose meaning is not immediately accessible, and

¹ For example, *free text recall*, a standard method for assessing reading comprehension in young children, reveals differences between children that are linked to their social backgrounds (Doyon & Fisher, 2010).

which, for example, require the reader to draw inferences or allow multiple interpretations, is now widespread, and it is commonly accepted that their study at school should start as early as possible. The appearance of the notion of “literature” in the national curriculum for primary schools, in 2002, institutionalized the phenomenon. In 2007, France’s Ministry of Education published a list of recommended books for first and second grade, covering a variety of genres, from picture books to poetry, and levels of difficulty. The list includes many recent books, thereby illustrating a trend in favor of complexity that has been analyzed by Quet (2009) and Bonn  ry (2010), amongst others. These books are characterized by narrative polyphony, intertextuality, open endings, and a disregard for genre characteristics. They no longer offer the reader a linear track to follow, as is the case in classical children’s books (Goldstone, 2002), and some require cultural background knowledge (Bonn  ry, 2010). Such changes in children’s books, particularly picture books, can also be seen in North America. Dresang (1999, 2008) used the term “radical change” to describe the development of a range of new features in contemporary children’s literature, including changing forms and formats, changing perspectives, and changing boundaries (characters portrayed in new and complex ways, new and unusual settings, and unresolved endings favoring indeterminacy in written or illustrative texts, plots, characters, or settings).² Recently, the United States’ Common Core State Standards have put emphasis on “complex texts”. The selected texts encompass books with the above-described characteristics in order to exemplify the level of complexity and quality that the Standards require all students in a given grade to engage with (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010a, 2010b). Thus, the growing complexity of the children’s books used in classrooms appears to have spread to many countries.

The present study draws on reading research, as framed above. However, it also draws on Basil Bernstein’s work highlighting the implicit or explicit nature of classification forms, segmentation, transmission of school knowledge, and the visible or invisible nature of pedagogies (Bernstein, 1996). The fact that some components of the learning process tend to be left implicit—for example, teachers do not always explain all the learning objectives of the tasks they give students—may cause difficulties for some students, especially disadvantaged students, who are often unfamiliar with the school world and its requisites. Our team’s research underlines the extent to which the opaque and implicit nature of schools’ expectations, education system functioning, and students’ expected working habits contribute to underachievement by disadvantaged students (Bautier & Rayou, 2009; Rochex & Crinon, 2011). In fact, social inequalities in success at school can be largely attributed to differences in students’ relationships to the world and to language (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). The school system expects students to have the ability to consider

² *Changes in reading material are not restricted to children’s books; they also affect content area textbooks (Bautier, Crinon, Delarue-Breton, & Marin, 2012).*

language and worldly objects as subjects for analysis, for questioning, for work, and to have a context independent and universalistic use of language (Bautier, 2005). These dispositions are acquired very early by children in families with open communication systems, which Bernstein (1973) called “personally oriented” (use of language in the person area) and which are often middle class families. In contrast, children from families with low sociocultural status often develop a non-reflective, context dependent, and particularistic use of language based on immediate experience. More recently, a study by Bonnéry (2015) showed that parents have different ways of engaging in book reading with their children and that each way contributes differently to children’s early language and literacy development. Families with low socioeconomic status often limit themselves to using closed-ended questions during read-alouds, whereas parents from higher socioeconomic groups tend to discuss aspects of a text in ways that encourage analysis and foster the comprehension of different levels of meaning. The influence of various types of book-readings on the acquisition of language and literacy skills has also been shown by Hindman, Skibbe, and Foster (2014), whose findings highlight the importance of making connections between a story and the child’s own experience.

2. PURPOSE

The present study applied this line of questioning to teaching practices in reading. Our objective was to determine whether or not these practices tend to create or reinforce difficulties in understanding a text, or even engender “socio-cognitive misunderstandings” (Bautier & Rochex, 2007). In other words, our research question brought together reflections on complex reading materials with analyses of how common teaching practices, such as describing illustrations, discussing a text’s meaning, and predicting contribute to the construction of reading failures. This exploratory study focuses on describing teaching practices (how a teacher conducts interactions in the classroom and how oral scaffolding is provided) and the processes students engage in trying to make sense of complex texts at a disadvantaged suburban French school.

French curricula recommend teaching children how to predict events and outcomes (MEN/DEGESCO, 2008). The Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children also recommends that curricula for grades 1 through 3 should include “predicting events and outcomes of upcoming text” (Snow & Burns, 1998). Therefore, our analysis focused on the influence of this strategy on students’ comprehension. Prediction is a strategy in which readers combine information from a text (including titles, headings, pictures, and diagrams) with their own personal experiences in order to anticipate what they are about to read. It helps students become actively involved in reading and keeps their interest level high. When making predictions about the text before, during, and after reading, students use what they already know, together with what they suppose might happen, to make connections to the text. Research has shown that these techniques are effective

(see Pearson & Fielding, 1991, for a review). Hansen, as well as Hansen and Pearson, assessed the effectiveness of pre-reading discussions designed to teach 2nd- and 4th- grade students to generate expectations about what a story's characters might do. In addition to practicing inferential story questions, "this technique led to improved comprehension for both young and poor readers on a variety of measures, including understanding new, uninstructed stories" (Pearson & Fielding, 1991). In reciprocal teaching, prediction, combined with three other activities, has also been shown to be an effective strategy for 7th-grade students (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Furthermore, both McGinley and Denner, and Marino, Gould, and Haas found that writing in order to anticipate story information improved story understanding and led to significantly better story recall (cf. Pearson & Fielding, 1991). LaBerge and Neuman showed that story previewing (giving a synopsis of events up to the climax) accompanied by student discussions also had positive effects on a variety of comprehension measures of students in 4th grade and above (Pearson & Fielding, 1991). The National Reading Panel Report mentions teaching prediction, combined with other strategies such as question generation, summarization, and clarification. The studies reviewed by the National Reading Panel reported mixed effects for such instruction for 4th grade through 6th grade, and significant effects for 7th and 8th grades (NICHID, 2000).

Hence, our study examined what is likely to happen when a teacher implements these techniques in her very own way, without following any research protocol, in the specific context of her classroom. We hypothesized that the learning difficulties experienced by some beginning readers from disadvantaged backgrounds are related to certain reading materials, as well as to the way the teacher uses these materials in classrooms.

3. METHOD

The present research was part of a larger study into the use of complex reading materials (children's books and textbooks) in the teaching of literacy to 1st- and 2nd-grade students from advantaged versus disadvantaged social backgrounds (Bautier, Crinon, Delarue-Breton, & Marin, 2012; Viriot-Goeldel & Delarue-Breton, 2014). We used an ecological approach in which teachers taught their classes in their usual way, choosing their own instructional materials and approach, including the quantity and nature of the activities they used with their students.

The present paper combines analyses of two complex children books used to teach literacy with a case study of their use in a disadvantaged classroom. Our findings are based on observations made throughout the school year of how these books are used in the classroom, including the tasks students are asked to perform and teacher-student oral interactions.

3.1 *A school in a disadvantaged area*

Data were collected in a class at a suburban school that met government criteria for inclusion in state compensatory education programs. These criteria include the socioeconomic status of the students' families, local unemployment rate, and percentage of non-French speakers, etc. (Demeuse, Frandji, Greger, & Rochex, 2012). In addition, the school obtains well below average scores on annual national tests. Participants were 25 1st-grade students, all from disadvantaged homes, and an experienced primary-school teacher, who has been teaching for 35 years, including 10 years at 1st grade. The teacher is also involved in the initial training of teachers.

3.2 *Teacher-student oral interactions*

One of the team's researchers was present in the classroom for three full weeks in January, when the students were studying the first book, *The Elf's Hat*, and for two weeks in June, toward the end of the school year, when the class was working on the second book, *The Recipe of Me*. We audio-recorded and transcribed more than 18 hours of verbal interactions during the classroom sessions, which included a range of activities focusing mostly on the students' comprehension of the books. We used transcriptions of verbal interactions, students' writings, and assessments of students' comprehension to analyze 20 classroom sessions during which the students studied the two books. This corpus enabled us to describe teaching practices and the ways in which the students responded to the task instructions they were given.

3.3 *Assessing students' comprehension*

Assessments of the students' reading comprehension of the books were based on a second corpus of students' productions comprising (i) students' writings during the sessions (see appendix A) and (ii) individual oral free-recall of the texts, followed by questions on specific difficulties in the texts (see appendix B). These data were collected individually in a separate room. The texts were divided into units of meaning corresponding to the main events in the story and to the information that should be inferred. We noted the presence or absence of these units of meaning in the students' text recalls and listed information added by the students showing that the "situation model" (Kintsch, 1997; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983) they had built was incompatible with the text data (see Appendix C: Table of false predictions recalled by the students).

The following section presents our analyses of the two books read in class, showing their complexity and underlining specific difficulties they were likely to cause. This is followed by an exploration of the contents of the classroom sessions, focusing on the teacher's practices. Finally, we examine these dimensions in rela-

tion to the students' comprehension of the stories, as revealed by their oral and written productions.

4. BOOK ANALYSES

Comprehension difficulties experienced by 5- and 6-year-olds when reading or listening to children's books can be caused by three main features: picture interpretation, picture-text relationships, and the linguistic and organizational characteristics of the text (Canut & Vertalier, 2012). All three of these features occur in the two books we analyzed.

The first book, *The Elf's Hat*³, is an adaptation of a classic cumulative tale from Russia. An elf drops his hat on the forest floor. Along comes a frog, who decides the cap will make a fine house. Before long a mouse joins him, followed by many other animals, big and small, who also move in and make themselves at home. A story rhythm is created by using patterned language and short sentences, including a rhyming refrain that is repeated with each new arrival, who chants: "A home-in-a-hat? Imagine that! Hello in there. Do you have some room to spare?" There is just enough room for everyone—until the last, tiny creature, a flea, comes along. A collective "NOOOOOO!" fills the hat and its inhabitants run back into the forest leaving the flea to live in the hat alone. Soon after, the elf finds his hat, oblivious to its tiny new inhabitant.

In this unrealistic tale, in which animals of all sizes pile together in an expandable hat, humor culminates when the smallest animal, a flea, creates panic and causes the bigger and stronger animals to flee. This comic effect is not immediately accessible to children. In order to understand the text, it is essential to understand its cumulative structure. Supplementary cultural information is needed to understand the tale, such as the characteristics of fleas, including their usual diet.

Here, colorful illustrations play an important role because, in addition to illustrating the text, they add numerous details. For example, the wide page margins show additional visual traits, such as animal tracks, bugs, worms, and seedpods, etc. When these illustrations are unrelated to the story, they are likely to divert a child's attention from the plot. In addition, some of the illustrations do not depict the differences in the sizes of the animals, showing them all to be more-or-less the same size. Consequently, the illustrations are more likely to create confusion than clarify the text. The importance of this was increased for the class we studied because, as classroom observations showed, the teacher based her comprehension teaching on analysis of the pictures.

In *The Recipe of Me*⁴, it is the text itself that is difficult to understand. The illustrations do not blur the meaning, but neither do they provide clues that could clari-

³ Brigitte Weninger & John A. Rowe (2000). *The Elfs's Hat*. New-York, London: North-South Books.

⁴ Raphaële Frier & Audrey Pannuti (2011). *La recette de moi*. Paris: Naïve.

fy it. The title gives a first indication of this ambiguity. It is a recipe, but for what? A dish? A cake, perhaps? No: “for me”. Who is this “me”? The first page tells us, but the explanation is just as disturbing: “Fate”, we read, “did the cooking, nine months before my birth”. The “Me” is the narrator, a young girl who is talking about her own birth. But who is the cook, “Fate”? Here, fate is the personification of an abstract notion, a rhetorical device with which six-year-old children are unfamiliar. And why nine months? Knowledge of the world is needed to understand this.

Although “cooking” reinforces the idea of cooking recipe, that does not reduce the difficulty of the tale because the concrete image of cooking tasks, which students will be familiar enough with to understand, is not sufficient on its own. In the book, “cooking” is a metaphor. All the physical and moral characteristics inherited by the young narrator – from “mommy’s curls” to “grandpa’s smile” and the “temper tantrums” that lead her to argue with her cousin – are ingredients in the recipe that has made the narrator what she is. And, she concludes on the last page, “do not try to follow this recipe, it won’t work again, I am unique”.

Hence, in order to understand the story it is essential to have recognized the metaphoric nature of the “recipe” and to view everything that follows in the light of what is said on the first page: “Fate did the cooking”. If the unifying perspective provided by understanding the metaphor is missing, the story is no more than a list of unconnected details, and the reader will be unable to form a mental representation of the overall situation.

5. RESULTS

Fourteen classroom sessions were dedicated to the study of the *Elf’s Hat* and six sessions were allocated to the study of *The Recipe of Me*. These twenty sessions included numerous prior-knowledge activation techniques, such as generating predictions during classroom discussions (four occurrences), drawing and writing predictions (four occurrences), and story previewing (one occurrence) in order to foster students’ comprehension (see Appendix B). They also included picture descriptions and discussions about the meaning of the texts. Our analysis of oral interactions is based on the four main extended discussions with the teacher, during which most of these teaching practices occurred (see Appendix D).

While introducing *The Recipe of Me* to the class, the teacher gave each student a copy of the book and asked them to turn the pages and “browse, look at, read and see what is inside the book”. A few minutes later, she gave the students a written assignment: “In two or three sentences (...), explain what this book is going to tell us; what story we are being told in this book; what you’ve understood by looking at this book. Put the book in your desk”.

For some of the children, the title word “recipe” and the illustration of a birthday cake evoked an actual recipe, sometimes a cake recipe:

The baby takes his mom’s cake recipe (Romane)

It's the story of a woman who cooks for her husband (Mehdi)

Eggs, flour, and I mix (Abdel)

Eggs, rice, hens, milk (Lounes)

During a 26-minute discussion, the teacher attempted to explain both the book's title and its first sentence. This discussion was characterized by a succession of misunderstandings. Linguistic ambiguity added to the misunderstanding, as "The Recipe of Me" sounds like a child's sentence that could mean "my recipe" or "the recipe of myself". "La recette d'une petite fille" (the recipe of a little girl) could also refer to either a cake recipe the girl has or to the metaphor of a recipe used to "make" a little girl. Eventually, the teacher accepted the following answer, although it did not clear up the ambiguity:

T: So, Yann, what does "The Recipe of Me" mean?

S: It's a recipe of someone

T: So, the recipe of who, for example?

S: Of a little girl.

The recipe of a little girl (...)

T: She can be seen here, the little girl. OK? So, the recipe of a little girl.

The end of the discussion about the meaning of the recipe compared a recipe and its ingredients to a family and its members, without making it any clearer. The discussion also failed to explain the title:

T: Do you have an idea why we're talking about a recipe? When we make a recipe, children, we've already said it. Leïla, when we make a recipe, what do we need?

S: Ingredients.

T: Ingredients, very good. And we need small things, ingredients. And now, if we think of a recipe in a family, would we have ingredients like this?

S: (...)

T: So, we could be a sum of ingredients, yes. But what would it mean to be a sum of ingredients? That we are ingredients?

S: That we are a family.

The discussion of the first sentence, "Nine months before my birth, fate cooked", also raised the idea of the recipe for a birthday cake:

T: "Nine months before my birth, fate cooked", what does that mean, then?

S: They've been cooking

T: (...) OK, yes. Do you know why she is talking about a cooking recipe?

S: Because the day she was born was her birthday and they made the cake.

The teacher explained that nine months is the time it takes for a baby to be born, but this discussion did not lead to a satisfactory explanation, either, because it failed to eliminate the hypothesis that the book contained a recipe for a real cake.

At the end of the six lessons on the book, the students had been asked several questions, including “What is this book about?” and “Why is this book called *The Recipe of Me*?” Their answers show that their misunderstandings had not been cleared up. Some students gave ambiguous answers, whereas others showed complete misunderstanding. Seven students thought the book’s title meant the little girl was making a recipe. Asked for more details, they mentioned a birthday cake (three students), a cake (two students), or a recipe for a birthday (one student). Three of the four children who thought this in the first lesson still believed it after working on the book for several hours.

Romane

What is this book about?

It’s about a recipe. That it’s a little girl who makes it. She was in her mommy’s tummy. The mommy, she’s had a child. She had a birthday party. She made a recipe with her mommy (...).

Why is this book named “The Recipe of Me”?

Because it’s a little girl who is making the recipe.

What kind of recipe did she make?

A cream cake.

Leïla

What is this book about?

About the recipe of myself/my recipe. Well, it’s the story of a little girl and she has a birthday party. She has temper tantrums. She’s unique.

Why is this book named “The Recipe of Me”?

Because when she celebrates her birthday, it’s a little girl who follows a recipe and celebrates her birthday.

What kind of recipe does she make?

A cake.

Our analysis of *The Elf’s Hat* revealed a similar pattern. An elf drops his hat on the forest floor. Along comes a frog, who decides the cap will make a fine house. Before long a mouse joins him, and soon bigger-and-bigger animals also move in and make themselves at home. When the bear arrives, the animals start being very crowded in the hat. At that point, the teacher asked the students to predict what happens next.

Although the teacher desperately tried to encourage other ideas, the idea that the hat breaks into a thousand pieces was repeated again and again. During a 21-

minute discussion, this idea was advanced by 11 different students, and was repeated 20 times through words such as “destroyed”, “into pieces”, and “tore apart”. Annoyed at not obtaining any alternative answers, the teacher changed focus slightly from “what could happen instead?” to “yes, and what could happen after?” After the discussion, a group of five students dictated to the teacher a collective follow-up for the story in which the hat breaks into pieces. The other students wrote their own version of the story, supposedly individually, but they may have exchanged information with their classmates. Nineteen students wrote that the hat breaks into pieces, while only three students suggested another idea.

An extended discussion of the flea’s arrival should have enabled the students to build an accurate representation of the story (session 11, 45-minutes long). The teacher pointed to interesting aspects of this excerpt, asking: “What does the red square in the picture represent?”, “Why is it depicted like that?”, “Why do the insects have a telescope?”, “Why is the flea carrying a white flag?”, “Why is “noooo” written with so many Os?”, and “Why wouldn’t the other animals let the flea into the hat?” The analysis of language interactions in the classroom revealed three major characteristics of the way the teacher led this discussion.

- 1) Most of the time, the teacher did not approve or disapprove a student’s idea. In what may have been an attempt to encourage student participation, she welcomed each suggestion without passing any judgment. By doing so, she gave no hints to the students about whether they should accept or reject each suggestion. She even accepted contradictory suggestions, as shown in this example of the flea both giving up the fight and starting a war:

Teacher, repeating student 1’s suggestion: It abandoned the hat. That’s why it has a white flag.

Teacher, immediately after student 2’s suggestion: So, I take up your idea that it has come to start a war. What sort of war?

Student 2: The sort of war that will allow it to have the hat to itself.

Teacher: You think the flea wants to have the hat to itself? OK. And, that’s the story of the war. And you, Eliot, what would you like to say?

The students are left with two contradictory explanations, without any comment other than an “OK”, indicating that the teacher had understood what the student had said. Most of the time, discussion about the questions raised was ended before any kind of agreement, or even a suitable explanation, was reached.

- 2) In addition, this comprehension discussion dealt with the part of the story that was predicted by the students in the ninth session, but the teacher did not refer to these predictions to say whether or not they were reasonable.
 - 3) Finally, several interruptions and digressions in the discussion blurred the real issue:
- Irrelevant input from the children: There were numerous false or uninteresting suggestions. For example, more than two minutes of the debate was devoted

to a student's suggestion that the hat looks like a boat, without leading to any meaningful ideas.

- Misbehavior by the students: The teacher had to interrupt the discussion twelve times to deal with misbehavior.
- Attention diverted to points other than the meaning of the text, such as several minutes spent discussing aspects of meta-language (quotation marks, question marks, and pronouns), which interrupted the discussion of the flea's arrival.

At the end of the fourteen sessions devoted to the *Elf's Hat* story, each student was asked to tell the story. Thirteen of the students mentioned the hat breaking, as if having heard so much about this prediction and having written it made it real. Romane's and Samia's text recalls are good examples of this.

Romane:

The elf. And after, the branch knocked his hat off. And he didn't realize. After, he left and the hat stayed in the grass. And after, the frog went in the hat. And after, a mouse asked the frog if he could come into the hat. After, a rabbit coming to the hat asked if he could come in with the frog and the mouse. After, a hedgehog came and asked, "can I come into the hat?" "Yes". The bird came to the hat and went straight in. And, eh... And asked if he could come into the hat. The boar came to the hat and asked if he could come in with the others. After, a wolf came to the hat and asked if he could come in. After, a fox came to the hat and asked if he could come in with the others. And a bear came to the hat and wanted to come in and asked. After, the hat tore and everyone fell out.

Samia:

And after, they came, and after the boar he said, "A home in a hat, imagine that". After, he went "ouahh", and when he went "ouahh", after the frog and the mouse and the rabbit, the fox and the bear, they said, "yes, yes, we are here. Come in, too". And after the boar went in, and when the boar went in, they were starting to be crowded. And when they started being crowded, then, they started being crowded, and then they tore the hat. Then, the elf said, "where is my hat?" Then he hung it up, it was in the grass and all the animals gave the hat back to the elf in a thousand pieces.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The teacher began the reading of both books in the same way: asking the students to take a global look at the book, either by examining the cover (*The Elf's Hat*) or by flipping through it (*The Recipe of Me*), in order to encourage them to anticipate the meaning of the text. The teacher stimulated the students by asking them, in a group session, to say what they had understood from what they had seen and read. In fact, our numerous classroom observation sessions have shown that French elementary school teachers commonly use this strategy as a way of starting reading comprehension sessions.

As noted above, teaching beginning learners to anticipate is not an inappropriate objective. In fact, anticipation helps construct coherence between different pieces of information in order to produce a “situation model” (Kintsch, 1998 ; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983) and provides practice in constructing such models, thereby helping young readers develop effective reading strategies. In addition, when reading literary texts, as was the case in our study, anticipation provides a taste of a certain form of literary pleasure by comparing expectations with what is learnt by reading further. Sometimes expectations will be fulfilled, as in fairytales and romances, or disappointed, as in “tales of the unexpected”.

However, problems arise when this strategy is applied to picture books because students tend to focus on the pictures when responding to their teacher’s questions. The pictures in the books we analyzed did not always correspond exactly to the text and they provided few clues children could use to draw up hypotheses. A second characteristic of the teacher’s approach was that, during the initial sessions, she left the discussion open. By neither confirming nor contradicting the student’s propositions, she allowed them to express any hypothesis they wanted. This approach can create socio-cognitive misunderstandings, a situation our team has noted during several studies (Bautier & Goigoux, 2004; Bautier & Rochex, 2007; Bonn  ry, 2007). For students who have not been introduced at home to the subtleties of the school world, their understanding of school situations may be very different from their teacher’s understanding because they do not have a good enough understanding of a situation’s importance and objective. A task can only become a teaching situation if the students understand the task’s cognitive objective (Bruner, 1971) and are able to articulate it with previously acquired knowledge (Fluckiger & Mercier, 2002). In addition, the task must involve suitable forms of intellectual work aimed at developing universalistic meanings that are not dependent on context. When teaching approaches/materials mask these cognitive objectives, students are likely to resort to simple task performance without learning anything or to merely try and guess the answers the teacher expects (Mercer & Howe, 2012). In other words, the failure to understand the text is compounded by a deeper and more serious (socio-cognitive) misunderstanding of the objective of the work being done and the intellectual activity it calls upon.

In our study, the teacher wanted to obtain a list of hypotheses produced by the students, in order to subsequently investigate these hypotheses during a detailed, page-by-page search for the text’s true meaning. However, most of the students interpreted the teacher’s actions differently, taking her silence as approval: If the teacher did not correct what they said, it was because their contributions were acceptable. Hence, what was said during the prediction session was remembered as a “right answer” and reproduced later in the students’ written and oral productions, not only by the students who gave these answers, but also by other students. The teacher failed to explain or clarify his general strategy, which was to use the text to confirm or refute the students’ hypotheses.

Finally, after reading the books in full and following several discussions of their contents, the teacher did not go back over the students' predictions, either to validate them or to show how the story followed a different path to the one predicted by the students.

Altogether, these elements may have contributed to the fact that students relied too heavily on background knowledge when interpreting the texts. The process of over-relying on background knowledge has been defined as "producing an incorrect answer resulting from substantial or complete dismissal of text information in favor of prior knowledge, interpreting text content to conform to prior knowledge", and which is more likely to be found among weak or disabled readers, and among students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (McCormick, 1992). This process is often regarded as a consequence of excessive difficulties with word identification; however, our case study shows the extent to which, in certain contexts, it can be exacerbated by teaching practices.

Most of the students in the class were unable to create valid situation models of the texts they were being asked to read. In fact, many children's books are challenging reading materials, although teachers are often unaware of this. The use of such materials and the difficulty of reorganizing a false representation of a story elaborated during prediction sequences add to the usual difficulties experienced by disadvantaged students. This combination of factors seemed to prevent most of the students constructing comprehension and, possibly, perceiving how the comprehension of plain text and illustrated books is built. Such failures may have serious consequences for subsequent learning.

Our case study calls into question Tauveron's (1999), Goldstone's (2002), and Pantaleo's (2004) enthusiasm for reading complex picture books at elementary school. Inspired by reception theories (Eco, 1979; Iser, 1978), these authors suggested that such books allow students to explore different levels of interpretation, learn how to make inferences, and fill gaps in the text, all of which are essential characteristics of reading. "Open" exchanges between students within a class should allow them to become actively involved in the construction of meaning.

In contrast, our case study highlights the fact that constructing meaning is not automatic. It seems that the way in which a teacher scaffolds (or does not scaffold) the construction of meaning is particularly decisive in enabling young students with little experience of picture books to understand and interpret these books. By experience we mean familiarity with genres and with the characteristics of the books read, and with the strategies to use, especially for bringing together information of different types and from different sources, including the text, images, knowledge of the world, and knowledge of texts. As we saw here, when the students did not understand what they were being asked to do and their actual cognitive activity differed from the target activity, it is not enough for the teacher to be aware of the processes of understanding and the skills to practice. The question of whether or not the nature and aim of a task are clear is undoubtedly decisive (Butier & Rayou, 2009; Bernstein, 1975).

However, one of the most important limitations of this kind of case study is the difficulty of knowing the extent to which findings can be generalized (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The concrete knowledge produced by case studies is often context-dependent and it can be difficult to distinguish the role of the different contextual elements. Students' difficulties in understanding texts might result from different causes. Is it because these disadvantaged students are less familiar with complex texts? Perhaps they sometimes misunderstand school concepts and routines (What is a prediction? What is story recall? Does the teacher's acceptance of an oral contribution mean this contribution is true?). Is it because they lack cognitive abilities? Is it due to a combination of all these reasons? Nevertheless, our team's research has repeatedly shown that teaching practices that are effective in advantaged schools can be counterproductive in disadvantaged schools (Rochex & Crinon, 2011). The present exploratory study provides an insight into the use of complex texts in disadvantaged schools and suggests avenues for further research, for example, to investigate the use of complex texts in combination with prediction strategies. Are commonly effective prediction strategies also effective with 1st graders studying complex and therefore hard to predict texts? Are they as effective in disadvantaged schools, where there appears to be an accumulation of obstacles to students creating valid images of complex texts, as in advantaged schools?

When teaching six-year-old children how to understand texts, it is not unreasonable to use texts with characteristics that make them difficult to understand, as long as this difficulty does not exceed the students' abilities. How else can children be taught strategies for resolving the problems such texts pose? The present study suggests that teachers must take into account the characteristics of the texts used, such as the confusion produced by the pictures in *The Elf's Hat* or the intrinsic importance of the recipe metaphor in *The Recipe of Me*, when deciding how to teach reading. There is no standard scenario that can be used for all texts; therefore, it is important for teachers to carefully analyze the reading materials they use and to choose these materials bearing in mind the difficulties students may have in reading them. Designing a reading session also involves taking into account the nature of the materials, especially when semiotic heterogeneity or departures from the classic narrative sequence are likely to differ from young readers' points of reference.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Writing tasks

In *The Elf's Hat* sessions, students were asked to do four different writing tasks related to the book:

- After a classroom discussion of the cover, they were asked to describe what they could see on the cover, what it reminded them of, and what they thought might happen in the book (session 1).
- They were asked to write another beginning for a similar story, with a green hat that becomes filled with other animals (session 7).
- After reading about the bear going into the hat, they were asked to write the continuation of the story, completing the sentence: "It was getting crowded in the elf's red hat. Very crowded!" (session 9)
- After reading the end of the story, they were asked to imagine the continuation of the story, in response to the book's last sentence: "Why, just imagine that!" (session 11).

In *The Recipe of Me*, they were asked to do four writing tasks:

- Following a classroom discussion of the book's cover, the students were asked to describe what they could see on the cover, what it reminded them of, and what they thought might happen in the book (session 1).
- After a discussion of what the little girl in the story looked like, they were asked to write words describing the little girl's appearance on a mind-map, and then to write a one- or two-sentence portrait of the girl (session 3).
- They were asked to write another portrait of the little girl, completing sentences with words from a list (session 4).

The students had to write descriptions of themselves by completing a cloze test (session 6).

*Appendix B: Assessment procedures (Oral Recall Protocol)**The Elf's Hat*

Comprehension of the story was assessed using free recall of the text, with students being asked to answer the following question: "Could you tell me the story of *The Elf's Hat*?" The researcher offered scaffolding and asked questions as follows:

- Encouragement, invitations to continue (*Yes, very good, and what happened next?*)
- Validations
- Repetitions, summaries
- Requests for clarification (*What do you mean by...?*)
- Requests for explanations (*Why? Where? How?*)

The Recipe of Me

Comprehension of the story was assessed using free recall of the text followed by the questions:

- Why is this book called *The Recipe of Me*?
- What does this first sentence mean? (Reading of the sentence: "Fate did the cooking, nine months before my birth").
- Who is telling the story?
- Why does the little girl look like her family?

The researcher offered the same types of scaffolding and asked similar questions to those described above.

Appendix C: Table of false predictions recalled by the students (The Elf's Hat)

| | Number of occurrences in the texts students wrote during session 9 (n=22) and name of the students | Number of occurrences during classroom talks | Number of students recalling this false prediction in their final text recall (n=22) and name of the students |
|--|--|---|---|
| The hat exploded/broke/tore apart/into a thousand pieces | 19 Yaya – Mehdi – Manon – Samia –Théo – Kerem – Yann B – Abdel– Océane – Ilyas – Ali – Sema – Clémence – Mohammed – Leah –Matéo – Ahmed – Yann A – Enzo | 20 (session n°9) 2 (session n°11) 20 (session n°13) | 15/22 Sema – Yann A – Jordan – Yann B – Ilyas – Samia – Abdel – Djamila – Leah – Romane – Manon – Clémence – Océane – Matéo –Aziza |
| Animals brought the hat back to the elf | 7 Océane – Abdel – Ali – Sema –Clémence – Matéo – Yann A | 3 (session n°9) | 6/22 Yann A –Samia – Abdel – Clémence – Océane – Matéo |
| Animals fell down after the hat exploded/flew away | 2 Mohammed – Enzo | 4 (session n°9) | 6/22 Yann B – Leila – Leah – Romane – Océane – Matéo |
| One threw the hat in a trash can | 8 Yaya – Mehdi – Manon – Samia –Théo – Kerem – Mohammed – Enzo | 11 (session n°13) | 5/22 Jordan – Ilyas – Manon – Océane – Ahmed |
| One fixed/sewed the hat | 10 Yaya – Mehdi – Manon – Samia – Théo – Kerem – Océane – Ali – Sema – Clémence | 0 | 4/22 Yann A – Jordan – Clémence – Océane |
| Flea drank the animals' blood | 0 | 4 (session n°11) | 3/22 Ahmed – Lounes – Djamila |
| Confusion with Little Red Riding Hood | 0 | 4 (session n°1) | 2/22 Manon – Océane |
| Elf is angry because its hat exploded | 1 Enzo | 1 (session n°9) | 1/22 Djamila |

Appendix D: Predictions and previews in the study corpus

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| <i>The Elf's Hat</i> | |
| Session 1 | 1. Observation of the book's cover and discussion of what the story could be about. 2. Drawing of what might happen in the story 3. Students individually wrote their predictions |
| Session 9 | 4. Extended discussion about what might happen after the bear's arrival 5. Students individually wrote their predictions |
| Session 11 | 6. Looking at a picture and extended discussion about what might happen next in the story 7. Students individually wrote their predictions |
| <i>The Recipe of Me</i> | |
| Session 1 | 1. Students' preview of the book 2. Students individually wrote their predictions of what the story may be about 3. Discussion of what the story could be about. |