Collaborative Reading: What to do when they can’t read the textbook

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Collaborative reading (Gibbons, 1993) is a strategy that is helpful to English language learners when they are reading for information. This strategy also allows a teacher to support readers of various abilities in working collaboratively as they study a specific topic. Students use a variety of library and/or textbooks with information on the topic being studied. These books are selected to provide a wide range of reading levels to meet the needs within the class. The group has the advantage of reviewing information from four or five different sources, depending on the number of students in each group. Members of the group then discuss the information gathered so that everyone becomes an expert on the topic. Collaborative reading provides a method for all students—regardless of reading ability—to participate in a group research activity (Tompkins, 2007). Because the teacher selects books appropriate for the reading levels within the group of students, each student can make a significant contribution to the collaborative task. English language learners are supported because, if necessary, they have texts with simpler language and illustrations. Each member of the group can contribute in unique ways. English language learners may contribute by drawing a visual to represent the main points of the collaborative research. This allows them to provide a translation of the information by reporting orally to the group if there are other students who share the
same home language, or providing information related to the difference in use of the concept being studied in the students’ home cultures.

**Step-By-Step**

The steps in a collaborative reading lesson are as followings.

- **Gather a range of books on a topic** - Gather books on the topics to be studied, making sure to include books at various reading levels so that all students will be successful in finding information.

- **Organize heterogeneous groups** - Carefully considering the strengths and needs of the students, organize your students into groups of four or five to explore topics. Make sure that each group contains a student with strong reading and writing skills. Have each group explore either a different topic or a different aspect of one topic. Instruct the groups to brainstorm questions they want to answer about their topic. These questions can be included on a KWL chart, a chart on which the students note the things they KNOW about the topic, the things they WANT to know about the topic and, after the collaborative reading, the things they LEARNED about the topic. These individual KWL charts may be simply created using a word processing program that includes a chart-creating function. They may just simply brainstorm their questions on a list. Depending on the topics, it sometimes works to have the whole class brainstorm questions and then have each group answer the same group of questions on their topic. Provide each member of the group with a book on the group’s topic. Be careful to match the books with the students’ reading levels. Each member of the group researches the group’s questions using a different book on the topic.
• **Provide research instruction** - Instruct the members of the groups to find the answers to the group’s questions in their books and take notes about the information they will share with their group. You may have to teach a mini-lesson on how to read and take notes, jotting down important facts.

• **Create a data chart** - After group members have completed their note-taking, have them discuss their findings, create a data chart—a form of information matrix—or other visual, and plan how they will share their research with the whole class. A data chart form is shown here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions Sources</th>
<th>Question #1</th>
<th>Question #2</th>
<th>Question #3</th>
<th>Other Interesting Info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source #1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Source #2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Source #3</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Students note the information they have gathered in the boxes, cite their sources in the source boxes)

• **Practice and share information** - Have the groups work on their group presentation and then share their research and visuals with the whole class.

• **Document the group process** - Document the group’s success in working together, following instructions, gathering information, and presenting their information to the group. You can do this documentation through anecdotal records, checklists, or rubrics. An example of this type of checklist is shown here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Names</th>
<th>Question #1</th>
<th>Question #2</th>
<th>Question #3</th>
<th>Other Interesting Info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behaviors</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Works collaboratively</td>
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Applications and Examples

Example 1 – Ms. Frederick’s Third Grade

Ms. Frederick’s third graders are studying insects. Because the students’ reading abilities vary greatly and the science textbooks are too difficult for many of the students, Ms. Frederick decides to gather a number of library books for them to use in researching insects. The media specialist at her school is extremely helpful in locating books at varying reading levels and Ms. Frederick locates four or five books or chapters in books for each of the insects the students have identified as interesting. Ms. Frederick arranges the books by topic: bees, ants, beetles, grasshoppers, and roaches. She labels the books with correction tape so that she will be able to give students books at their reading levels. The easiest books are marked 5, next easiest 4, and so on, with the most difficult labeled with the number 1.

The students sign up for groups depending on their interests, but Ms. Frederick makes sure that there are some able readers in each group. Before she lets them start their research, Ms. Frederick does a lesson on note-taking. Using an informational book on spiders, she reads aloud and models note-taking on the overhead projector. She stops...
after a few examples and involves the students in deciding what notes she should add. Before she has finished, the students understand how to select important information for their notes and they also have learned why spiders were not included on their list of insects to be researched. The next part of the mini-lesson involves finding research questions. Ms. Frederick leads the class to ask basic questions, which she writes on the transparency of the data chart. This enables the students to discover how to look for information, answer the research questions, and note the information in the proper box on the chart. She models the use of several books on spiders to demonstrate that the students will not find the answers to all the questions in the same book. She also points out some conflicting information in several of the books.

Ms. Frederick moves the students into their interest groups and they begin to read their books and take notes. Toward the end of the period, she instructs the students to add their information to the group data chart. The students are then given a few minutes to discuss their findings within the group.

During science period the next day, the students get back into their groups and discuss how they will present their findings to the class. One group decides to make a fact book about bees and read it aloud to the class. One group decides to make a poster about grasshoppers with a large labeled picture of a grasshopper and small posters surrounding the large one with facts about grasshoppers. The ant group wants to make a model of an ant with papier-maché. They will write facts about the ant on large green paper shaped like blades of grass and place the ant in the grass. The beetle group decides to put their data chart on poster board and give an oral presentation using the data chart. Each group is busy preparing their visual and their presentation. Ms. Frederick’s class was able to
learn many things through their collaborative reading projects. Every student contributed information to the group reports. All the students learned much more about the topics than they could have learned reading independently. They felt like researchers and were successful in presenting information orally.

Example 2 – Ms. Stacy’s Fifth Grade

Ms. Stacy is a fifth-grade teacher with a multicultural class ranging in reading ability from first-grade level to eighth-grade level. She decides to do a collaborative reading project on the human body. Ms. Stacy follows much the same procedure as Ms. Frederick did but with one interesting twist. The day of the presentations, Ms. Stacy moves all the desks in her classroom to one side. She sets the chairs up in a large semicircle, three chairs deep. At the door of the classroom that morning, Ms. Stacy has each child sign in and get a name tag, a folder with a yellow pad and pencil, and a paper robe that she purchased at a medical supply house. Her students are all presenters at a mock medical conference. She has invited the local television station to come and tape the conference, and she has set up a lectern, microphone, and sound system—transforming the students into medical professionals at a conference. They present their reports and visuals solemnly, smiling for the camera only when they’re finished with their reports. After their reports, the groups must field questions. They handle the questions well. They have obviously done their research thoroughly. Each group seems to know which member of the group is likely to know the answer to the question. One student, when stumped for an answer, replies, “I’ll have to get back to you on that one.”

Conclusion
Collaborative reading can be used to provide students with knowledge from a variety of sources. It supports the formation and strengthening of a classroom community by providing students with an activity in which their unique gifts (such as speaking more than one language, drawing, or using a computer or other technology to create visuals) supply a valuable component to the group presentation. In the process of creating, practicing, and presenting the group report, the students are given several opportunities to acquire new vocabulary, to write and reread English and home language summaries of the material read and written, and to communicate in English for a meaningful purpose.

References


