
The Use of Television in the Development of Literacy

BETHAN MARSHALL

King's College London, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT This article considers the uses and benefits of schools television programmes aimed at developing literacy. It begins to examine the wider implications of the uses of film and television narrative on the teaching of reading. The research looks at the practice of two primary schools in west London in which a schools television programme formed a central part of the literacy teaching. It goes on to draw conclusions about the way in which such programmes can be used more effectively in the teaching of reading.

There is a view abroad that the activities of reading and watching television are mutually exclusive and in particular that the latter activity will have a seriously detrimental effect on any desire to engage in the former. But the clash between literacy and new technology is not confined to the age of the television and computer. In 1912 a headteacher wrote to *The Times* and said, "Reading standards are falling because parents no longer read to children, and too much time is spent listening to the gramophone".

Despite this, hundreds of thousands of pounds are spent every year on schools broadcasting designed specifically to support literacy. An Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) report in 1992 on *The Use of Educational Broadcasts in Primary Schools, Summer 1990 to Spring 1992* commented on the regular use of broadcasts to support 'language work' and stated that, "These programmes, often in serial form with exciting story lines and well written scripts, were particularly well matched to the pupils' age and ability". It has also often been observed that a television serialisation or a film of a book ensures that those texts enjoy huge sales.

This research project arises out of this debate and aims to explore the effectiveness of television programmes designed specifically to support the literacy development of young children and ways in which teachers can capitalise upon these findings.

The basis of this research was carried out by observing pupils watch the television series *Rat a tat tat*, a series of 10 programmes, made for Channel 4 Schools, aimed at 4-6 year-olds. The research took the form of a

case study in two schools in the west London borough of Ealing over a 10-week period during the spring term. Pupils were observed over a half-day period, before, during and after watching the programmes.

The two researchers and the teachers involved made observations which took the form of detailed note-taking while the pupils watched the programmes; detailed note-taking during the follow up activities; and the occasional recording of small group discussions amongst the children. At the end of each session, teachers and researchers shared their observations and at the end of the project the teachers and researchers involved shared their observations for half a day.

The series *Rat a tat tat* is designed to help children read both by encouraging an enthusiasm for books and stories, and by focusing on the mechanics of reading, within the context of the books that are chosen. The programmes, which last 15 minutes, bring to the screen one or two books, whether by animation or use of rostrum shots. Many of the books have a strong patterned text and repeated phrases. The story is read by voice-over and certain repeated phrases appear on screen. As each of the words is read, it is highlighted on screen, so emphasising the correlation between the spoken word and its written appearance. The programme also has a letter of the week, which arises from the stories. Letter work is often developed by looking at the initial phonic sounds in words. Letter formation is also illustrated. Finally, at least one song is sung every week and this is either animated or sung by children in the studio. On occasion there are other activities and games that are thematically linked to the story.

Each programme is hosted by a presenter who introduces various items, including most of the stories, letters, songs and games. In most of the programmes he starts by clearly showing that he is reading from a book before the animation of the story begins. This is intended to reinforce the link between the television treatment and the books themselves.

The two schools where the research took place, in the London borough of Ealing, were chosen partly because they differed in character, area and pupil intake and also because they had, independently, chosen to use the television series. St Anselm's Roman Catholic primary school is situated in Southall and many of the children were bilingual; some in the reception class spoke very little English at all. Northolt Primary is situated in one of the large post-war housing estates in the north of the borough, from which the majority of the children are drawn.

In Ealing all children start school in the year that they are 5, which means that many children with summer birthdays are only just 4 when they start. In each school, two classes participated and in both schools the classes were organised by age. At Northolt all the children had joined the school the previous September, but in St Anselm's, one class was comprised of children who had started in September while the other was vertically grouped so that half the class, who were the youngest in their year, had started school the previous September. In all approximately 100 pupils aged between 4 and 5 took part in this project.

Both schools used a variety of strategies in the teaching of reading. Both followed popular reading schemes and used *Letterland*, a scheme encouraging letter recognition and phonic sounds through the use of characters associated with each letter. Storytelling was a feature of all classes involved in the project and all classes had book corners with a range of books.

In St Anselm's the two classes did preparatory work for the programme separately, watched the programme together and went back to their own classes for follow-up work. In Northolt the two classes came together to view the programme, but follow-up activities were undertaken in the form of small group work on a carousel system, where the children moved between three teachers and a classroom assistant.

For the purposes of the research, it was felt that it might be useful to break down the reading process into a number of component parts which reflect the various activities taking place in the classroom. All these component parts are, however, interconnected and overlapping.

One of the most striking features of using a television in the classroom is the children's enthusiasm for it as a medium. One of the main reasons that the teachers chose to use a television series to complement their provision for the teaching of reading was that the children enjoyed watching television and they hoped that the explicit focus that the series makes on books might encourage children in their reading. One teacher noted that:

The use of television seemed to encourage children to use books. Children were interested in seeing books come to life and this was motivating and confidence building. They picked up books used in the series with the confidence of already knowing the story. This helped them retell the story in their own words and to guess at some of the words used in the text.

The teachers anticipated that the children would transfer their enjoyment of the television programme to the actual books used in the series, and so it proved to be a way of enhancing the reading environment in their classrooms. Pupils clearly identified that the programme was about books. This correlation was made explicit by teachers, who often pointed out that the presenter was looking at a book before the animation appeared on screen, and also by the way in which work connected with the books was carried out after viewing.

In Northolt, the teachers had copies of most of the books in the series. Before the programme, they would present the book to the class and indicate that it would be available to read after the television programme. The television books were also displayed in a *Rat a tat tat* book box. The books were displayed attractively and were given prominence as a reading resource in the classroom. This had a positive effect on the enthusiasm with which the children chose and reread the stories. In St Anselm's, after Programme 6, pupils asked, "Are you going to read the book from the telly, Miss?" The following week they asked the same question before the programme had

even begun, indicating that their enjoyment of the programme gave them a desire to revisit the story through the book itself. One teacher noted that:

The pupils seem to choose and return to the Channel 4 books more often. They took care of them and returned them to their special box for others to use. We have a lot of lovely books in our classroom, but I think that the television series has in some way made the books used even more attractive. Experiencing the stories in a variety of ways makes the stories more familiar and the children are more confident using them.

But the series did more than simply make the books familiar. The teacher reading a big book allows the whole class to share a text, where they can all see the pictures and the text clearly. Yet the reading of a big book is not as effective as television at making the one to one correlation between the words as they are seen and the words as they are spoken. It is the way in which the text appears on the screen, highlighting the individual words as they are spoken, that seems to be the most significant way in which television enables children to decode print.

In addition, the way in which the pupils respond to the screen is very different to the way in which they listen to a story being read. They are used to interacting with a screen. Far from observing passively, they talked to and at the screen throughout the series. Initially the teachers were concerned that pupils should be quietly attentive during viewing, yet as the weeks went by they became more concerned with encouraging the children to interact with the television.

Watching the television became a collective experience. Children became active participants through reading, predicting, calling out and joining in with the songs. This was seen as a positive feature of using the television programme and a vital tool in exploring the learning that was taking place and their visual awareness of print.

When the pupils began watching the series they used prediction and anticipated the reading of the text. They appeared to use three main devices in their prediction. The first was previous knowledge of the text. The second programme featured an animated version of the rhyme 'Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?' The children were familiar with the story and so when the question was asked, 'What do you see?' they would call out the answer, 'white dog', 'black sheep', 'gold fish', etc., before the caption appeared. When the rhyme was repeated, this time with the text, most of the children would join in in a more unified manner. They seemed to be using the rhythm of the reading to time their responses, but it was the familiarity of the text which helped them to join in.

Children also used picture cues. On occasion the pattern of the text would alter by one word and the key to that change lay in the picture. Again they demonstrated their use of this cue by anticipating the narrator's reading, for example in Programme 3 the book *Hattie the Hen* is animated. Hattie sees a fox slowly emerging from a bush. The pattern of the text remains the same, altered only by the emerging parts of the fox's body. Most of the pupils confidently 'read' the text as it appeared on screen, recognising

the variations correctly. Many children actually pointed to parts of their own bodies as the text accumulated and there seemed a general air of pleasure at getting it right. When the last word came up on the screen, the children positively bellowed ‘moo’ along with the cow.

In both these examples the children were using their understanding of the pattern of the text to help them predict what would come next and the actual sense of the text. In the first programme a bear greets various animals but at the point it starts to rain he takes his leave. None of the children said hello when they should have been saying goodbye. It seems likely that they noticed the different look of the words as well as realising from the sense of the story what the word must be.

In all these examples the pupils anticipated the text. What was particularly significant, however, was the moment in Programme 4 when watching the animation of the book *Cat and Mouse*. It was at this moment that the children actually began to read the word as it was highlighted on the screen. In this particular story the pattern is strong but the preposition changes, for example, ‘The mouse went down. The cat went down’, ‘The mouse went over’. While they were still using the picture cues to help them with the changing words, they seemed to have made the connection between the spoken and visual appearance of the word. They understood the one-to-one correlation.

For the second book in the programme the children took this a stage further and added expression. A cat irritates a number of farmyard animals but gets the last laugh. Here the repeated phrase alters with the name of the animal: ‘the farmyard dog/ goat/ bull, etc. was very angry’; again they used the pictures to help them. By the end not only were the children joining in with the whole phrase, but they were all emphasising the word ‘angry’ more than the rest and again were waiting until the word was highlighted on the screen.

While the children did not always read the text so clearly, from that point onwards they seemed clearer about the relationship. For example, in the earlier programmes, when asked whether or not they noticed that the words were highlighted, they had not; but when asked again at the end of the series, they were all aware of the pattern of the text on the screen.

Part of the children’s development resulted from the work that surrounded the programme. While watching the programme, the teachers emphasised the correlation by reading the text in time with the highlighting of the words. Perhaps even more important was the work that was done after watching the programme.

One of the main ways of following up the work was to revisit the books either by asking them to sequence the events in the story or by asking them to find certain phrases in the book. The pupils had no difficulty in finding those phrases that had been highlighted, nor did they simply find the phrase as a whole but were able to identify the individual words. Even where groups contained children of different reading abilities and different competences in English, all the children were able to identify

the phrases used in the programme. When they were introduced to repeated patterns that had not been highlighted in the programme, the children varied initially in their ability to find them. Although they often found them eventually, they were not always able to identify individual words. One girl who spoke little English and was extremely shy was able to point to phrases with a confidence she had never showed with her reading scheme book.

Similarly, a teacher described her experiences with a child in Northolt who was struggling with his reading scheme book and found it difficult even to discuss the events in the story. To finish the session she read with him, 'Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?' Having turned to help another child, she saw Kieron pick up the book and look through the pages.

He went back to the beginning of the book, and, unprompted, read aloud the entire text to the penultimate page. This was after seeing it only once on television and subsequently having had it read to him once. That short exposure to its repeated and patterned text had given him the confidence to tackle the text and see himself as a successful reader. This was something he had been unable to do with his 'reading book'.

It is possible that the repetitious showing of the phrases in the patterned texts acted like a form of flashcards. The children became familiar with them and certainly the way the children joined in bore a striking resemblance to the rote chants associated with that method of learning. Where it differs is that these phrases appear within the context of a story so that the children need to use more than simple rote, especially where the phrases subtly changed. Some of the children were able to put the phrases into the sequence in which they appeared, and all of them were able to do this with the aid of the pictures.

When the teachers observed the children in the book corner during the week they found that the children used the phrases that had been highlighted accurately and at the right point in the story. Moreover the teachers found themselves reappraising the reading abilities of children as a result of using the series.

Some children selected and used books that I felt were beyond their level in terms of the scheme. The popularity of the books from the series encouraged us to widen our notions of what books are suitable and helped us not to underestimate the capabilities of certain pupils.

Yet it was the interactive nature of the series that proved to be a particularly important feature when assessing the pupils because it allowed teachers to observe children's reactions, both in the comments they made on the stories and in their reading the captions, without them being aware they were being observed.

At St Anselm's, Sharon, who was 5 and had been at the school for over a year, had been identified as a non-reader, but the teachers were electrified to see her reading fluently from the screen. It seems clear that she was

actually reading rather than anticipating because she read new phrases as they appeared on the screen before the presenter had spoken them.

The first time I observed this was watching the programme 'The Sunflower that went Flop'. When the sunflower had drooped for the first time and the word 'flop' appeared on the screen, she said 'flop'. Thinking that perhaps she had remembered the story, I watched her carefully when the next new phrase came up: 'Said the people passing by'. She repeated the phrase before the narrator had said it. She continued to do this in subsequent programmes. It meant that she could do more than had previously been thought and she completed a difficult matching exercise that she would not otherwise have been asked to do.

Another boy did the same, and while he had been identified as a boy who could read, the teacher watched him carefully to see how much he could do. Again it allowed her to set him work that she might not otherwise have done, as she based the judgement on his spontaneous response to the programme. It is possibly the fact that children feel unobserved that makes television so useful. It may well be that when working with a teacher and a 'reading book', Sharon, like many children, felt under pressure, whereas when reading from the screen she felt free from judgement and was confident enough to read.

In a sense television asks the very young to engage in a form of reading around the class, an activity they would not be expected to do until they were older, more fluent readers. Yet because the reading that they do is in chorus and is part of the interactive fun of watching, it takes away much of the solo pressure associated with the former activity. In addition, the teachers are freer to observe because they were not reading the book themselves.

The series has made me change my expectations of some children because it allows you to watch them and see what they can do. They'll sometimes read things from the screen that you didn't know they could or they'll come with a different attitude to the books they've seen on screen.

What emerged from the research was the confidence with which children approached the television and the way in which the teachers learned to utilise this confidence both by developing the pupils' literacy skills and by reassessing them in the light of the evidence that the activities presented. Watching the series and following up that experience offered specific opportunities for developing literacy that would not have been present had the two schools not chosen to use *Rat a tat tat*. Other opportunities did, however, present themselves that appeared to emerge from the pupils' own familiarity with the medium of television, and again the teachers were eager to build these in to the way in which they approached books.

For many of the children in the school, their only experience of English outside school is television. It is important to use their understanding of

television in class. They know all about characters on television and you can use this when you're talking about books. What's useful about Rat a tat tat is that the children are actually being given reading to do as well as just talk about books.

The children enjoy watching television and are often sophisticated viewers from an early age. Teachers can tap into this enthusiasm to promote a real understanding and love of books. Much of a children's early understanding of narrative comes from television (Robinson, 1997). For some children it may be their only experience. Even those pre-school children who are read to frequently at home will often encounter more complex narrative forms on television than they would from books aimed at their age range, particularly those aimed at toddlers. It might be argued that they develop as much of their understanding of archetypes, for example goodies and baddies, or plot, from watching a Disney cartoon as from a children's book.

From an early age children learn to decode visual signs and symbols. They can tell the difference between a factual and a fictional programme. Pre-school children also gain an understanding of the structure of stories – that they can have a beginning, middle and end. One of the researcher's own children, aged 2, even when watching a video she has never seen before, will say, "It finishing now". In order to do this she is having to employ more abstract skills than merely noticing that the book is coming to an end. She appears to be using some understanding of the forms and conventions that signal that the end is coming, both by the way in which the events are going, and by what a closing sequence looks like.

Older children, 3 and 4 year-olds frequently, comment on whether someone is good or bad. They appear to be using both the character's actions, the music and the appearances to interpret this. They also become increasingly interested in motivation: "Why did he do that?" These are critical behaviours that one would not expect to see in children until they are much older if we were considering analysis of print.

The children in both schools showed a similar degree of interpretative skills when watching the programmes. When watching *The Sunflower that went Flop* they grasped that the story worked on two levels. A wife asks her husband to fix her wilting sunflower but instead of watering it, he in turn props it up by tying it, sewing it and nailing it, all the time claiming that he can fix anything. When he eventually runs out of ideas and the flower recovers because of rainfall, he claims the success as his own. The children commented on the husband's solutions throughout and laughed at his punchline. Several called out, "He didn't fix it, it was the rain". The staff had been anxious that the children would fail to see the irony and that the book would simply seem sexist.

As a result we were able to start questioning them about the story at a different level from one we might have adopted had we not heard what they said. We were able to look at other stories both in books and on

television, where characters did and didn't fix things, confident that they understood important nuances in the stories.

In some respects the story looks at a capable man and an incompetent woman. Having watched the programme the classes made a list of people who could fix things, including television and hook characters. Once the children had drawn up a list which included fathers, Captain Scarlet and Batman, it was noted that few of the people were female, which led back to looking at another book, *The Paper Bag Princess*. This book is another attempt to re-examine roles and stereotypes, this time using children's familiarity with fairy stories. They came to this book having already explored many of the issues it potentially raises. This interplay between television and print was important, therefore, in allowing the teachers to explore quite difficult but important ideas with very young children, and use their understanding of one medium to explore another.

Similarly, it helped the children interpret events and characters' reaction to them. In the story of 'Hot Hippo', which is a fable explaining why the hippopotamus lives in water, the voice of Ngai echoes and booms. Many of the children closed their eyes and stuck their fingers in their ears or did both whenever he spoke. Hearing his voice helped them to interpret both the character of Ngai and the hippo's reaction to him. When the story was followed up in St Anselm's with a group of half a dozen children, they spoke at length about Ngai. When they were asked to add a thought bubble to the hippo to say what he was thinking, they did so most successfully on the page that showed the hippo's encounter with Ngai. Their response was more varied and insightful. They made comments like, "I want to go home", or "I don't like it here" and "I'm scared", rather than one word responses or no response at all. It seems that because they too had been scared by the voice they were able to show empathy with the hippo.

If children are capable of making such critical judgements about things that they have watched, it would appear that it is important to use this ability when they are talking about or reading books. Their experience of television has equipped them to ask the same sort of questions of books as they would of something they have seen, either by explicitly linking the programmes and the books as was done in this research, or by looking at a book.

Any resource is to a certain extent only as good as the way in which it is used and this is also true of television programmes like *Rat a tat tat*. The way the series was used and followed up seems crucial. The more the connections between the books and the programmes are made explicit, the more the children appear to gain in confidence both in terms of decoding print and understanding meaning. A teacher said:

We'll certainly use the series again. I think the children really benefited from watching a programme that made books fun and I certainly think it gave them confidence in tackling books afterwards. They are confident that they can read the books because they've seen them on telly. You could see their confidence increase as the series went on and we found

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ways of building on that confidence. The kind of work that they did following it was great.

Correspondence

Bethan Marshall, School of Education, King's College London, Cornwall House, Waterloo Road, London SE1 8TX, United Kingdom.

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