

Promoting Adolescents' Comprehension of Text: A Randomized Control Trial of Its Effectiveness

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Study Background and Purpose

A strong foundation in reading comprehension skills is essential for student success in and beyond the language arts classroom. As students progress through the secondary grades, courses like history require reading comprehension skills to both access and apply learning from the course content. What approach can teachers use in a wide range of settings that is both **effective and efficient** in building reading comprehension and content knowledge?

Promoting Adolescents' Comprehension of Text (PACT) is a text- and discourse-based set of instructional practices that can be integrated within typical content area instruction, such as history. These approaches support students' access to content knowledge through practices that also foster growth in reading comprehension (Vaughn et al., 2013, 2015, 2017; Wanzek et al., 2016).

PACT includes the following five components:

- **Comprehension Canopy:** Support for students' background knowledge that provides an engaging introduction
- **Essential Words and Warm-Ups:** Instruction or review of high-frequency and high-utility words through student-friendly definitions
- **Critical Reading of Text:** 20-minute interactive reading sessions that include student discussions with peers and teachers related to the text
- **Team-Based Learning Comprehension Checks:** Quick assessments related to the text that students complete with peers
- **Team-Based Learning Knowledge Application:** Activities that explore multiple perspectives and develop critical thinking

Design

This study used a randomized control trial design to identify the effectiveness of PACT when implemented with middle school students in U.S. history after typical professional development. The study investigated PACT's effectiveness when implemented in a "real-world" setting, as opposed to a more controlled research study.

The sample included 48 middle schools from multiple states across the United States that were randomly assigned to either the treatment condition (PACT) or the control condition (typical content area instruction). After random assignment, there were 24 schools in each condition. Teachers in schools implementing PACT participated in a 2-day training to learn about the PACT practices and the research study. Depending on the school schedule, PACT was implemented as a companion to the standard history curriculum either 4 days per week for 45 minutes or every other day for 90 minutes.

Measurement

Measures in this study captured student levels of reading comprehension (both general and content area specific) and history content knowledge.

Results

PACT practices fostered positive outcomes for students in both general and content-specific reading comprehension, as well as history content knowledge. Estimates of the students' history content knowledge after engaging in PACT practices approached a large effect size. Though not statistically significant, the PACT practices demonstrated promising effects on secondary students' reading comprehension (both general and content specific).

These results indicate and further reinforce that PACT practices are highly effective and can be embedded within any content area instruction to support a wide range of learners.

Implications for Practice

- Educators can effectively teach content-specific courses while also developing students' reading comprehension using PACT.
- PACT has demonstrated gains for students with and without disabilities, as well as students who are English learners, thus proving to be effective for all learners.
- PACT provides a means to build reading comprehension when embedded in any content area course.
- PACT supports deeper learning across content areas, improving student content knowledge while also satisfying both state-specific and common core standards.

References

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