

RESEARCH REPORT

How can a reciprocal reading model support oracy in a Y7 art class?

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Abstract

Context: This study was conducted in a Year 7 (ages 11–12) art class at an independent co-educational school, involving 22 students. The school was participating in a Close-to-Practice (CtP) partnership with Nottingham Trent University. The inquiry aimed to integrate oracy into art lessons by using reciprocal reading, which had previously been explored through staff development focused on reading across the curriculum.

Aims: The research focused on developing students' oracy skills—defined as the ability to articulate ideas and influence others—by expanding their vocabulary and confidence in speaking about art. Specifically, the goal was to understand how a reciprocal reading model could enhance students' discussions about artworks, with a broader ambition to improve their ability to write critically about art in later years

Methods: The study used reciprocal reading, where students took on roles such as questioner, clarifier, summariser, and predictor during group discussions about Georgia O'Keeffe's art. Data was gathered through students' journals, audio recordings, informal group discussions, and final collaborative artworks. Creative methods of data collection were inspired by a professional development session on creative research methods.

Findings: Four key themes emerged: the development of technical and reflective vocabulary, increased competency in art skills, greater confidence in expressing opinions, and enhanced skills in negotiation and persuasion. Reciprocal reading enabled students to articulate ideas more effectively, work collaboratively, and make choices regarding their art projects. Challenges included managing lively group discussions and balancing differing ideas within mixed-gender groups.

Implications: The study highlighted the benefits of reciprocal reading in promoting oracy, particularly in a subject like art. It also showed how student-led approaches could improve vocabulary use, collaboration, and creative decision-making. Future research could explore the impact of different group configurations and the application of these methods in other subjects.

Keywords: art education; oracy; reciprocal reading; collaborative learning; volition; vocabulary development; student-led inquiry.

Context

This inquiry took place in a Year 7 (aged 11-12) class in an independent co-educational school with optional boarding. The class of 22 students was comprised of 10 girls and 12 boys. Within the class, one student was a full boarder; 2 students had recognised SEND needs and 5 students were deemed Gifted and Talented. The class was enthusiastic to engage with this collaborative project which was part of a Close to Practice Partnership (CtP) being trialled by the Institute of Education at Nottingham Trent University. This inquiry involved a collaboration between a practitioner (Head of Art) from the school and an academic Primary Education practitioner-researcher with an English/Arts background from the university. Whilst definitions of CtP research are numerous and at times disputed, this small-scale piece of research sought to establish a collaborative partnership between researcher and practitioner to investigate a pertinent educational issue in a specific setting (BERA, 2017).

Motivation, focus and questions

The initial motivation for the inquiry stemmed from a whole school focus on improving students' engagement with, and resilience for, reading. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) within the school setting at the start of the academic year centred around consideration of specific strategies to support reading, and challenged staff to consider how reading could be developed across all subject areas within the curriculum, not just English lessons.

Considering how this might be applied specifically in the subject of art became a 'messy business' for us and involved unpicking the skills and processes required by good readers which included decoding, comprehension, fluency, accuracy, prosody and resilience. We began to realise that these elements could not just be viewed in the light of reading but were part of the wider remit of what is involved in the teaching of literacy. Reading, writing, speaking and listening are often considered as isolated silos of activity to be developed and improved upon within schools by those in roles with a particular connection to the subject area. Attempts to formulate our research focus in a clearly defined question demonstrated the challenges involved in trying to separate out and focus on specific elements of literacy and reflected the concept articulated by the Oracy APPG (2021, p.2) that oracy and literacy are "inseparable friends" that "piggy-back on each other during the school years."

Our deliberations led us to consider what 'reading' in art lessons might look like and whether it was about reading books about art and artists or about 'reading art' itself which we felt would involve being able to discuss artwork in an articulate manner. We felt such subjective dialogue would require pupils to have appropriate vocabulary but also the confidence to express these ideas.

Definitions of oracy (OAPPG, 2021; Voice 21, 2024) helped to crystalise our thinking that the development of pupils' vocabulary seemed a key concept to focus on which linked all aspects of literacy: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Woolley (2014, p.227) comments that "vocabulary knowledge underlies all learning and is one of the most significant predictors of reading comprehension."

From this reasoning, our research question began to emerge. We noted that the development of pupils' vocabulary, including subject-specific technical language, was a key issue in both KS3 and KS4

and became more problematic in summative assessments at GCSE and A level with students finding it challenging to express their critical viewpoints and consequently write reflectively about art.

Our rationale in working with a Y7 class was to encourage and establish an ethos of dialogic talk from the outset so that this would provide a structure to build on throughout KS3 and into KS4, ultimately supporting talk and writing about art during summative assessment points, although this was not the key driver for the research project.

Our decision to use the reciprocal reading approach of Palincsar and Brown (1984) as the basis for the design of our inquiry into how oracy could be developed, was made for several reasons (noted below) and from this our research question emerged: How can a reciprocal reading model support oracy in a Y7 art class?

Reasons for using Reciprocal Reading Model:

- the school had highlighted this strategy in CPD sessions based on evidence from trials being run during 2023/24 by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2019, 2020, 2024).
- Reciprocal Reading is an approach that is “both comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring” (Palincsar and Brown, 1984, p.121) through the assigning of specific roles to pupils: questioner, clarifier, summariser, predictor.
- After careful teacher modelling, the approach is child-led and therefore fitted with our overarching ethos that the research be participatory and child-centred.

At the end of the inquiry, we hoped to see an extended use of vocabulary and an increased independency in choosing and using vocabulary to discuss art.

Inquiry plan and activities

From the outset we wanted this inquiry to be a collaborative piece of research involving all participants and enabling ownership of the project by all participants. Wall (2019) notes that practitioner research begins with the plan, do, review cycle and as such, our inquiry plan was developed around the Y7 art curriculum topic of Natural Forms which included exploring the artwork of Georgia O’Keeffe. This was to be a co-inquiry with the pupils and therefore it made sense to use the intended learning activities created as part of the planning for this topic as data gathering opportunities.

As noted above, we used the Reciprocal Reading approach as a model to structure our inquiry plan because of its child-centred/child-led nature. A second model, based on Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-determination theory, as seen through the lens of Cremin’s (2023) work around reading and motivation, was also applied as the two models seemed to dovetail in their focus on three main areas that we felt should drive the inquiry (see fig. 1):

- skill development/competency
- child-led, offering autonomy, volition and ownership
- nurturing collaborative communities and relatedness

We also hoped that the application of the two models would support our critical thinking about the project - a feature that is important in Close to Practice Research (BERA, 2017).

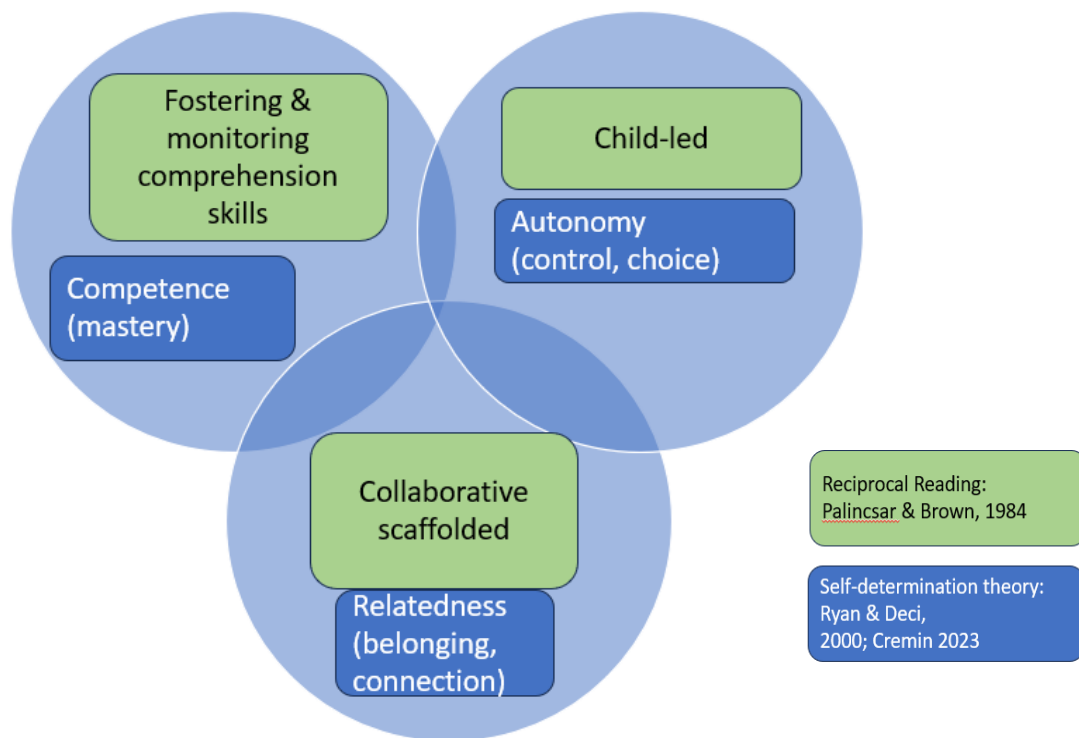


Fig. 1: Diagram to show the dovetailing of the two models applied to the inquiry

A CPD session based around creative research methods with Helen Kara, run by the Close to Practice Project at the university, encouraged us to think innovatively about how we would engage in creative research methods to gather data in this inquiry, enabling us to open up ‘different ways of seeing’ both in terms of data gathering and analysis. This concept of creative data-gathering and analysis seemed to harmonise with the subject area of art itself. It was also key to the inquiry that pupils’ voices were heard and so we chose to provide journals for the pupils in which they could record their ideas and thoughts during art lessons. This documentary evidence provided interesting data which could be triangulated alongside audio recordings of pupils’ discussions and informal focus group discussions within art lessons. We also drew on the final artwork responses created by pupil groups and their ‘found poetry’ to accompany this as further data to reflect upon.

An overview of the inquiry plan:

- Pupils respond to initial Georgia O’Keeffe stimulus picture/s individually in journals recording vocabulary choices.
- Pupils discuss vocabulary choices recorded in journals with a peer and record new vocabulary gained from the discussion in their own journals.
- Collaborative working groups, chosen by the practitioner with assigned reciprocal roles (questioner, predictor, clarifier, summariser), set up. Practitioner models the four roles.
- Pupils research and discuss Georgia O’Keeffe pictures using the reciprocal roles to support discussion. Discussions are audio-recorded.
- Pupils discuss ideas to inform the creation of a collaborative group artwork inspired by Georgia O’Keeffe. Discussions include choice of media to use in the final collaborative group work.
- Collaborative work undertaken and completed over a period of weeks.
- Pupils evaluate/reflect on the project based on structured questions prepared by practitioners. Responses are recorded in journals; informal focus group discussions undertaken with practitioners in classroom setting.
- ‘Found poetry’ is created collaboratively by pupils to complement artwork

Ethical considerations and relationships

As this was a practitioner enquiry approach, the project was part of the professional practice of the school-based researcher and therefore the project was part of the normal teaching routine for this class and the practitioner. However, it was important that ethical stance be considered. Permission to participate was gained from parents and from the stakeholders in school. The pupils were informed about the project at the outset as their views and participation was considered key to its success. All pupils engaged voluntarily in the project, and no-one was coerced into participating. Data was collected in school and kept safe, and the names and details of participants were not disclosed. Any use of their work was pseudonymised or names were redacted.

Findings

During the research it was evident that most students engaged with the project and their reciprocal reading roles well and were able to employ the strategies from the model to analyse and discuss the artwork of the artist Georgia O’Keeffe as well as make decisions on choice of media and approaches for their own collaborative group responses to her artwork. Data was collected from informal pupil conversations, audio recordings, pupil journal entries and final artwork and ‘found poetry,’ along with informal in-practice observations.

From thematic analysis of the data, four key themes emerged which seemed to harmonise with the definition of oracy which involves the eloquent articulation of ideas and thinking and the ability to influence others and confidently express viewpoints. The four key themes are noted below and will be considered individually.

Competency development in art

Pupils' responses to their perceived view of their own ability and skill in art was mixed. Whilst some expressed confidence in their art skills there was also the sensation that, certainly in group work, you might also be *"judged if [you] did something wrong"* and that it had the potential to create pressure on individuals *"to not mess it up."*

However, an increased competency in practical art skills was noted, with pupils acknowledging the challenges of working with particular media but commenting that they had *"got better"* at using their choices. One child commented in their journal that *"before I didn't really think I was very good at art but I would say that I've improved."*

This competency development seemed to be linked again to collaborative working practices with a sharing of skill sets and ideas a particular feature of competency development. Several pupils commented on the development of their confidence because of this, one child noted that *"my confidence has improved because everyone put ideas in."*

Another example of the link between collaboration and competency development was in the case of one child who had a particular skill and interest in origami. The impact of this emerged as part of the group's final artwork. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory appears to be particularly well-reflected here in the development of competency in origami skills throughout the group. Despite the challenges presented by this particular skill, as noted by some members of the group (*"I would change the origami idea because it was hard;" "no origami because it takes too long"*), they worked with a sense of relatedness towards a common goal. This autonomous choice of medium was outside the remit of the art skills they had been introduced to during formal art teaching that year and the 'found poem' created to accompany their final artwork featured *"communication, working together [and] discussing ideas"* as key drivers in their work in which all members of the group had been involved, possibly indicating a link between the development of oracy through the reciprocal model and the development of art competency skills.

Each group's final project was unique in its choice and use of materials. These final collaborative artworks reflected the use and development of some of the techniques covered in lessons introduced by the practitioner such as observational drawing using pencil, pencil crayon and biro, watercolour, pattern, design and printing but also other media chosen by the pupils which were used in unique combinations such as tonal pencil crayon shading and pattern; watercolour and origami; pencil shading and paper construction, and clay.

Confidence in articulating opinions and ideas

Pupils noted that their confidence in both generating ideas but also presenting them in groups had grown during the project. One pupil stated *"I now have the courage to give my opinion"* and others commented: *"I think my confidence has improved as I have more ideas and I am more confident to say them;" "I think my confidence has improved because before I didn't really like sharing my ideas now I feel like I can;" "I think my confidence has improved because I have gotten more used to talking in*

groups and merging ideas.” The pupils taking the role of summariser in each group did find gathering the ideas of all and presenting these challenging at times.

The allocation of pupils to mixed-gender groups that were not necessarily predicated on friendships, whilst challenging, supported them in presenting to others they may not have known so well. Development of vocabulary through collaborative working processes seemed to support pupils to express opinions and share their own thoughts and feelings, with several pupils noting discussion as being supportive of the development of their articulation of ideas.

Development of skills of compromise and persuasion

Pupils articulated that their skills of compromise and persuasion had been challenged and honed through the processes of discussion, negotiation and collaboration when working on their final pieces. Pupils acknowledged that negotiating a way through the different ideas of the group was tricky at times but had led to positive group outcomes (*“there were some arguments but overall it was fun;” “it was good but everyone had different ideas;” “positive and negative...ideas were getting shut down but we ended up doing well in the end;” “people had different ideas for something but at the same time we did make a good piece as a group;” “everyone had different ideas for the piece and we had to decide”*). One particular pupil noted that they were *“now better at compramisng [sic] and showing my ideas in a different [way]”* and others noted that they were better at *“merging ideas.”*

Pupils also commented on the impact they felt that particular groupings had on the energy of the working atmosphere, making reference to the importance of “positive energy” and acknowledging the “highs and lows” of the project and that discussion had created a “relaxed aura”.

Interestingly, this theme seemed to precipitate from the placing of pupils in mixed-gender groups, something that as practitioner/researchers we had not really considered the implications of in the initial stages of the project. There was a distinct sense that the mixed-gender groupings had led to some challenging conversations at times and that some pupils would have preferred smaller, same-gender friendship groupings (*“I would want my group to be all girls because they would be better and we would all work together great, also maybe a smaller group, like 3 or 4;” “I enjoyed working with the girls but not the boys because they all had diferent [sic] ideas and it got very argumentive [sic];” “I would love to work with a group of boys and some of my friends because we work well together and get things done and we have the same ideas. And in groups of 4”*). One group of boys noted that they had felt their ideas were “shut down” and certainly issues of control were a key driver in the level of enjoyment displayed by certain members of the group.

However, persuasion, compromise, discussion and a healthy level of competitiveness, both within and between groups, in the lessons appeared to have a positive impact on the final group collaboration with several pupils commenting on the pleasure and pride they felt in their final work and linked this to teamwork: *“our final piece makes me happy because it shows that we worked as a team.”* Several of the poems which accompanied the final pieces of work also reflected the idea of the power of collaboration, teamwork and discussion to accept difference but also create unity.

“They are as different as we are.

From this moment on, we are one.

Blending together as one piece.”

“Each square represents one of us, joining together to make a beautiful project of teamwork and resilience.”

It appeared that the child-led, collaborative approach of the reciprocal model supported the development of competence in both art skills and the use of subject specific technical and reflective vocabulary, leading to increased motivation to produce a final piece of work that each group felt invested in and of which they were proud, echoing the dovetailing of the reciprocal model with self-determination theory. Collaboration also encouraged compromise and acceptance of the ideas of others who may not be within a friendship group or of the same gender.

In this respect we felt that the autonomous, child-led, collaborative approach required as part of the reciprocal reading model, did support oracy and placed pupils in a position where they had to problem solve and monitor and reflect upon their use of language in discussions. Having control and choice, but within the parameters of group dynamics, also supported the development of skill competency in art and the use of subject-specific and reflective language. However, it also appeared to develop such defining features of oracy as articulating and expressing ideas with confidence and being able to assimilate and accommodate the ideas of others in the spirit of compromise alongside influencing and persuading with their own views. The impact of this process led to positive feelings from each group about their final outcomes along with acknowledgement of the challenges of the process and a sense of motivation to achieve highly, which harmonises with Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory.

Changes to practice

Enabling learners to guide their own learning through the reciprocal model, and observing the ensuing lively discussions which created a noisy classroom, was a challenge acknowledged by the practitioner. Being able to step back, relinquish control and ownership of the lesson and create a space for pupil autonomy and choice is often the antithesis of typical classroom approaches where the pressure of meeting curriculum expectations and evidencing outcomes through rigid assessment processes precludes pupil autonomy and lesson ownership. However, the impact of the learner-led approach through the reciprocal model was powerful not just in terms of the quality of oracy taking place but in the uniqueness of the final collaborative projects which emerged from the discussions.

We reflected that art is often seen as a time for quiet working as individuals but acknowledge through this project that team working is a powerful driver to develop confidence for certain individuals. It also encourages problem solving.

As noted previously, we had not really considered the impact of the mixed-gender groupings to any great degree prior to the project but on completion we reflected on how groupings and the size of group might have an impact on the quality of oracy development. This would certainly be something to consider if we ran the project in subsequent years and needs further exploration.

Reflective evaluation on the process

We felt that the reciprocal reading approach was very successful in giving the students an effective strategy to critically 'read' and discuss the artwork of Georgia O'Keefe. The clear roles of predictor, questioner, clarifier and summariser, and the careful modelling by the practitioner, scaffolded the discussions and enabled the successful application of a literacy-based approach to a creative subject. Pupils continued in these roles when developing ideas for their final pieces and discussing the pros and cons for the approaches they might take and the media they could choose to use.

One of the main challenges of the project, as noted above, was in the change to the classroom environment. The practitioner reflected that having such a lively and noisy classroom, as animated discussions were all occurring in groups at the same time, was not typical of art lessons and took some adjusting to. She acknowledged that this meant she needed to step back a little more and watch how it unfolded thus giving the students more ownership and control; allowing the process to take place after giving the students initial input. As practitioners we are often driven by deadlines and targets and the processes engendered by this project were more fluid which we acknowledged 'almost went against the grain a little.'

A further challenge was in carving out time to reflect on the emerging data and discuss this as we were both based at different institutions with leadership roles that limited the time available within our respective timetables. We were grateful for the allocated CPD sessions being run through the university and the 'free' time built in during these days which we were able to utilise effectively to take stock of the project at certain points during the year. Creating time to engage in such small-scale research can be challenging for practitioners and to be at its most effective, requires a positive and supportive view of the benefits of engaging in this kind of project from senior management.

One of the surprises was the way in which this CtP project, along with its associated professional development, enabled a partnership to evolve which empowered all participants and allayed our initial anxieties about the diversity of our backgrounds in secondary art teaching and primary practice/academia. The project has encouraged us to reflect on how an arts-based subject can support the development of literacy, and in particular the development of vocabulary and oracy, across all key stages. It is hoped that this research project is the start of a larger, more holistic, review of the ways that art can continue to support literacy in year groups and at whole school level.

An area that we felt needed further consideration was pupil grouping. We did not consider this in any great detail at the outset of the project. However, in a serendipitous manner this offered an opportunity for reflection that we had not really considered and that we felt influenced two of the main themes emerging from the project. The fact that pupils were not with friendship groups created tensions at times and yet from this arose the courage to articulate opinions and ideas and develop skills of compromise and persuasion. We have retrospectively reflected on what the impact of same gender or friendship groupings would have had on the outcome of the project and whether the same themes would have emerged. We would strongly encourage anyone conducting a similar enquiry to consider the aspect of groupings with a greater degree of insight from the outset.

If others were to conduct a similar inquiry, we would encourage them to enjoy the process of seeing the students work collaboratively not only in a practical and creative way but also in an environment which encourages and fosters discussion and ideas around art. The planning and organisation of resources and initial modelling and scaffolding the different roles in the reciprocal reading model is imperative to the success of the project.

The insights gained from this research enabled reflection by both pupils and practitioners on such issues as ownership of learning, power-balance in classrooms and grouping for collaborative work, all of which have implications for future practice.

Being part of the CtP project on a wider level enabled us to reconsider the traditional view of the roles of practitioners and academics, blurring the boundaries between the perceptions of these roles and consequently empowering our practice. The project created an inclusive and collaborative culture both in terms of our own small-scale research but also in the collaboration with other CtP researchers. It showed us the benefits of engaging in research to address specific and relevant, contemporary issues within our practice and in a supportive community.

Next steps

This project was presented at the Nottingham Trent University's CtP conference and subsequently to the senior leadership team at the school in which it was carried out.

Further work to develop and embed the reciprocal approach, as well as explore the impact of different groupings with pupils, needs to take place as the impact of mixed-gender, non-friendship groupings was not anticipated or considered in enough detail under the auspices of this particular small-scale project.

It was felt by the practitioner/researchers that embedding this reciprocal model into the art curriculum from KS2 (Year 6) upwards could provide regular opportunities for students to talk critically and reflectively about art, developing subject-specific and reflective vocabulary and oracy skills. It is hoped that, over time, this would lead to increased confidence in annotating sketchbooks and design sheets along with the ability to write critically about both their own and other's artwork, reflecting Britton's (1970) seminal statement that "writing floats on a sea of talk." Ultimately, it is hoped that there would be improvement in students' outcomes when producing written work for formal assessments in art. It would also be worth considering if this reciprocal approach to

encouraging and guiding dialogic talk in the classroom would work in other subject areas across the curriculum.

Supplementary materials / resources

1. Paintings by Georgia O’Keefe used as stimuli at the start of the project eliciting individual responses in journals:
 - Music Pink and Blue No.2
 - Red Canna
 - Pink Tulip
 - Cow’s Skull: red, white and blue
2. Enquiry plan
3. Reflective Questions for Pupils at the end of the project:
4. Final collaborative artwork and ‘found poetry.’

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