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Reading Preferences of Qatar Academy Students:
A study of the relation between Reading on Electronic Devices,
Independent Reading, and Read-Alouds

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Introduction

As the daughter of a teacher librarian, it goes without saying that I grew up surrounded by books. I loved taking trips to the library, choosing more books than I could finish in two weeks or even carry home, and cuddling up in my favorite chair next to the window in order to take a break from the “real world” and discover new worlds. But what are the factors that led me to enjoy this strange activity that might seem foreign to most of my 21st century learners in my middle school Humanities classes? How is it that I so willingly succumb to leisurely silent reading while many of my students seem repulsed by the idea of it?

My current school of employment is a unique school with a typical dilemma. Qatar Academy, sponsored by Qatar Foundation, is located in Doha, Qatar. Our school, being funded by the wealthy and generous Emir, is able to afford such luxuries as a 1:1 laptop initiative for all students in grades six through ten. Not only are students given free laptops from the school, most students come from families who are affluent enough to afford additional electronic devices such as multiple cellular phones, ipods, and ipads. Couple this information with a student population of approximately 90% English as an Additional Language Learners in order to gain a visual of Qatar Academy’s student body and the students which will be focused on in this investigation.

In my early days of planning this research, I came up with a number of possible theories to guide my exploration of reasons why students were avoiding “Free Voluntary Reading,” to cite Stephen Krashen. My first theories were related to the prevalence of technology in my students’ lives today. All of my middle school students are digital

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natives and most will always gravitate toward their laptop or other electronics over a piece of paper or printed book. Traditional reading simply cannot compete with the fast-paced world of online gaming, blogs, twitter, skype, facebook and other tempting social networking sites.

It is my personal belief that printed books will one day become obsolete and are already capable not of replacing laptops in the education world, but of aiding students in their learning process, particularly in relation to improving literacy for EAL learners. My original investigation idea involved a study of how ipads can increase literacy for my EAL students. However, a visit to Qatar from none other than Stephen Krashen himself caused me to drastically rethink my students' most pressing literacy needs, particularly those of Arabic descent (about 80-90% of the student population).

I have studied Stephen Krashen's theories of Second Language Acquisition and Free Voluntary Reading for the past three years of my TESL graduate career, but it was not until I heard him speak in person that I discovered the most likely answer to my earlier question, "Why don't my (mostly Arabic) students enjoy free voluntary reading?" Krashen began his lecture on Free Voluntary Reading by reminding us that independent reading is not the first step of his theory, but that a student is not likely to choose to read independently without first being *read aloud to*. When I heard this, the answer seemed to be apparent to me.

Arabic culture is not one of printed materials. Barely 15 years ago, my students' parents and grandparents were living a nomadic life where books (except for the Qur'an) were considered heavy and unnecessary in a life of constant travel. Therefore, it suddenly

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seemed obvious to me that while myself and most of my Western or “expat” teacher colleagues had been read aloud to diligently as children, my students had not.

This is not to say that my students’ cultures are unfamiliar with the idea of stories. On the contrary, oral storytelling was, and still is, dominant. This led me to my final theory and investigative focus on the importance of students being read aloud to before becoming motivated to voluntarily choose a book to read independently.

After combining my original focus on the idea of technology’s impact on literacy and my new-found obsession with the idea of read-alouds, I combined forces to create a simple and final research question to encompass all areas of investigation: ***How do students at Qatar Academy prefer to read?***

Literature Review

When asking myself my stance of inquiry, “How do students at Qatar Academy prefer to read?” I already had two main theories in mind that I hoped to investigate. My first theory comes from being a member of Marc Prensky’s “Digital Native” generation myself. As Prensky believes, I agree that young people today learn most effectively in varying ways when compared to previous generations, or anyone born before 1980 according to Prensky (Wan, 2004, p.1). Wan Ng article’s on Digital Natives (Wan, 2004, p.1) summarizes Prensky’s descriptions of Digital Natives’ learning styles clearly: “Digital Natives are active and experiential learners who like receiving information quickly, are multi-taskers, and parallel processors, and prefer graphics first over texts.” Prensky also states in his 2005 article that teachers “. . . must find ways to incorporate . . . the information and knowledge that their students acquire outside class in their digital

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lives” (Prensky, 2006, p.10). Taking these theories into account in inquiring how students prefer to read, my first instinct is to explore the realm of reading using electronic devices such as laptops, ipads, and other e-readers. While Qatar Academy students are only issued individual laptops for school use, many own or have access to ipads as well and are often encouraged to use these devices in class when appropriate.

Students at Qatar Academy are often asked to read, particularly for schoolwork, using these devices. Whether using electronics for pleasure or academic reading, however, Stephen Krashen argues even when students are reading on the internet through blogs and social networking sites, students are still reading (Krashen, 2012, IALS speech). He also claims that reading from the internet has been shown to improve reading (Krashen, 2012, IALS speech). Ipads are relatively new to the educational world and lacking in research, especially in relation to encourage motivation to read, but John K. Waters endeavored to investigate the effectiveness of ipads over other electronic devices in schools and found that many teachers saw ipads not as a replacement tool for laptops, but rather as a supporting tool “only within environments that also include access to robust desktop or laptop machines” (Waters, 2010, p. 5). Waters also found the sentiment that electronic reading devices, particularly ipads, are expensive and not practical when encouraging all students to learn to enjoy reading, a feeling that Krashen echoes (Krashen, 2012, IALS speech).

While electronic devices seem to provide opportunities mainly for individual reading, Stephen Krashen’s theory of Free Voluntary Reading reminds educators that there is a first step when encouraging students to read voluntarily. Krashen claims that students are not likely to read independently if they have not been read aloud to (Krashen,

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2012, IALS speech). Krashen's 2004 research (Krashen, 2004, p.7) states "when teachers read aloud and discuss stories with their students, students read more." This means not just reading to primary level students, but also to secondary level, particularly to those struggling in literacy or English Language Learners. Ephrata High School in Pennsylvania found that their secondary level students enjoyed being read aloud to, particularly when stories included "strong narrative voices, fast-paced plots, and realistic characters they can relate to." (School Library Journal) When referring to "read-alouds," most teachers immediately picture teachers reading aloud from a book. While this traditional method still is known to captivate audiences young and old alike, many forget, however, that electronic devices also provide opportunities to read stories aloud. As Krashen and other advocates of free voluntary reading agree, however, the invaluable key to instilling motivation to read in youth is not necessarily the method, but rather the story and its relatability to the reader (Krashen, 2012, IALS speech).

Research Methods and Procedure

My stance of inquiry, "How do students at Qatar Academy prefer to read?" will require understanding the students' thoughts and perceptions of their own preferences. Therefore, my methods of data collection will include student completed surveys using Google Forms and my own observation and field notes as their teacher. I will plan lessons involving different methods of reading, particularly reading individually on electronic devices and traditional read-alouds. As I teach middle school Humanities, most selected reading materials will relate to our current Humanities content, and will not

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require an accompanying task but rather will be selected reading to enhance the students' knowledge of the topics being studied.

As laptops are provided for each student, in-class activities I assign are consistently requiring students to read on their laptops (or ipads if they choose). I will regularly be observing their willingness to read using these devices and will include questions in the final student survey on their preference of this method of reading.

Traditional reading aloud to students will take more planning on my part. The chosen curriculum content and reading material will be as follows.

Grade 8 MYP Humanities, Unit 2: How can revolutions impact people?

- Industrial Revolution – excerpt from “Ashes of Roses” by Mary Jane Auch

I will narrow my research participants to one Grade 8 class (8D), mainly consisting of Qatari students. This will strongly represent the general proportions of nationality of Qatar Academy as a whole. I will incorporate other read-alouds into my Grade 6 and 7 Humanities classes as well, but will not include those students in my formal data results, but rather as informal additional information for further extension of this research.

After a full term of observing students' reactions to reading individually on electronic devices and being read aloud to, I will create a student survey using Google Forms to gather information on students' perceptions and preferences regarding use of electronics when reading, reading independently, and being read aloud to.

Data & Results

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In my selected classes of 8D Humanities (18 students), 88% are of Qatari nationality while the remaining 12% are of other Arab nationalities (see Appendix A). 100% of students own or have access to an ipad (see Appendix B), while it is already known that all students own or have access to a laptop due to the school providing all students with laptops. For purposes of this study and due to the above results, please keep in mind that the majority of students are Qatari, all are Arabic, and all have access to laptops and ipads.

Field Observations

While teaching a unit on Revolutions, I chose a young adult fiction novel called “Ashes of Roses” by Mary Jane Auch to enhance students’ learning experience of the working conditions during the Industrial Revolution. My school already had a two week time period where due to a United Nations International Conference (COP18) being held across the street from Qatar Academy, all students and teachers were required to report to 1st period classes 20 minutes early. I suggested to our administrators that we encourage teachers to choose stories to read aloud to students during this time period. I was lucky that my chosen class to observe, 8D Humanities class, is my 1st period class 2 out of the 3 class periods I see them each week. I choose to use these time periods to read aloud from Auch’s novel to enhance their current unit of study on the Industrial Revolution.

I chose excerpts from the novel, which described, in an historical fiction format, the story of a young girl caught in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911. I had several positive observations from this experience. First, knowing that students would still be sleepy when arriving to school at 6:45 a.m., I did not expect students to be fully alert and ready to learn in the mornings. I observed that students responded to a read-

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aloud at this time positively, and viewed this experience as a comfortable way to awaken their minds and ease into the lesson. The first time I read aloud to the students, I ended the session on a suspenseful note and many students responded with a verbal outcry such as “No! Keep reading!” I was happy to have this response because I knew they would be looking forward to when we read the next chapter during our following lesson.

I purposely did not require students to complete a task during or after listening to the story, but rather allow students to soak in the feelings that might accompany life during the Industrial Revolution. In the students’ summative assessment on revolutions, many students chose to focus on the Industrial Revolution as a case study and described aspects of working conditions based on what they had learned from the read-aloud sessions. Therefore, my observational field notes showed that reading aloud to my students was a positive influence in their learning of an historical content, but was not extensive enough to show an increase in students’ motivation to read independently. These positive results were echoed in the data results of the Google Form Student Survey further explained below. After the completion of this investigation, I plan to continue reading aloud and examine if this helps to increase students’ desire to read voluntarily.

Data Results from Google Form Student Survey:

I started by investigating students’ history of being read aloud to as children. I believed there might be a correlation between culture and frequency of being read to as a child, especially in the recently nomadic cultural history of Qatar. I asked students how often they remember being read to as a child and the results were surprisingly higher than I expected (see Appendix C). 35% of students said they were read to once a day and 29% said they were read to many times a week. None of the students said they were never read

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to while 24% said they were rarely read to and only 12% said they were read to many times a day. While I realize this is a small class and I would like to give this survey to a larger group of students, or eventually all Qatar Academy students in grades 6 – 12, my particular study did not prove that there is a strong correlation between Qatari culture and not being read aloud to as a child in relation to the current generation of students.

While culture may not determine the probability of being read aloud to in this instance, I did find a correlation between Qatari culture and oral storytelling (See Appendix D). 53% of students reported their parents or family members told stories many times a week while 29% reported storytelling occurred many times a day. Only 6% reported to have experienced storytelling rarely, and no students reported that their family members never told stories. Therefore, I believe there is a strong correlation between Arabic (particularly Qatari) culture and oral storytelling.

I went on to ask students their preferences between oral storytelling, being read aloud to, and independent reading. When asked about storytelling, students showed a significant preference (See Appendix E). 53% of students said they often enjoy when someone tells a story and 29% always enjoy oral storytelling. When asked students' enjoyment of being read aloud to, 53% reporting they sometimes enjoy being read aloud to and 29% reporting they often enjoy being read aloud to. The remaining categories of always enjoy being read aloud to, rarely enjoy and never were each 6% (See Appendix F). While the results of the questions of preference on reading independently were different, they showed an interesting comparison to the preference of being read aloud to and came in slightly lower (See Appendix G). 47% said they sometimes enjoy reading

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independently while 18% reported always, 18% reported rarely, 12% reported never, and 12% reported they often enjoy reading independently. While these results were a bit more evenly dispersed than the previous two questions, it still can be concluded that students prefer independent reading less than both storytelling and read-alouds, though students' preference for independent reading was still stronger than I had expected.

While my observational field notes on students' response to reading aloud in class was positive, the data results proved to be positive as well (See Appendix H). When asked how much they enjoyed when Ms. Peak read aloud about the Industrial Revolution, 65% said it was great, 24% said it was okay, 12% indicated indifference, and none reported that they didn't really like it or that they disliked it very much. Additionally, when asked how much students felt the read-aloud helped them learn about the Industrial Revolution, 59% reported that it helped them learn a lot about the Industrial Revolution, 41% said it helped them learned a little, and 0% said it didn't help them learn anything about the Industrial Revolution (See Appendix I). Therefore I can conclude that reading aloud was beneficial in helping students learn about the curriculum content.

My last student survey question, "Which do you prefer, reading silently or being read aloud to?" essentially summarizes my stance of inquiry and produced interesting results. Though more students preferred being read aloud to with 53%, reading silently was a close second choice with 47% (See Appendix J). Therefore my research shows that students prefer to be read aloud to, but more students than one might expect also prefer to read independently.

Conclusion and Proposal for Qatar Academy

Conclusion:

My conclusions to my stance of inquiry of “How do students at Qatar Academy prefer to read?” will provide insight to Qatar Academy’s re-implementation of a reading program, which in previous years did not prove effective. In the school year of 2011 – 2012, administration implemented DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) once a week, at the end of the week, for 30 minutes during advisories. Students were expected to bring their own chosen reading materials and read silently for the duration of the advisory period. The program largely failed and was not re-instated during the following school year. As an educator who highly values the research provided by theorists such as Stephen Krashen on the positive impacts of Free Voluntary Reading on English Language Learners, it is in my immediate interest to use this investigation to explain reasons why the program was not successful in the past and how it can be readjusted to create successful readers at Qatar Academy in the future.

The data from my investigation showed that the majority of students actually prefer storytelling compared to read-alouds or independent reading. While this is an invaluable piece of information that I was not expecting, this will be important for another conversation at Qatar Academy. For purposes of practicality, we will focus on reading aloud and reading independently, while the implementation of more storytelling can be discussed at a later time.

Ultimately my data results showed that while many students at Qatar Academy enjoy reading and are seemingly at a level in which they are ready to read independently, more than half of the QA population does not enjoy reading individually, and prefer to be

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read aloud to. Some may simply not enjoy reading individually, while some may not be at a high enough level to enjoy reading independently.

Proposal for Qatar Academy:

My proposal is that whatever the reason the majority of students do not enjoy reading independently may be, the first step to encourage reading amongst our student population is to implement a read-aloud program during advisory meeting times. The data also showed a high percentage of students who enjoy using electronics to read. Therefore, while I do not believe that reading on electronics should be required, I strongly feel that students should be allowed if not encouraged to read on electronics. Further exploration should also be initiated to determine the opportunities for both read-alouds and independent reading through the use of electronic devices, whether laptops or ipads.

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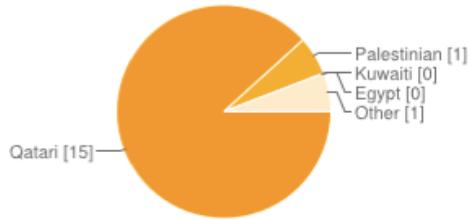
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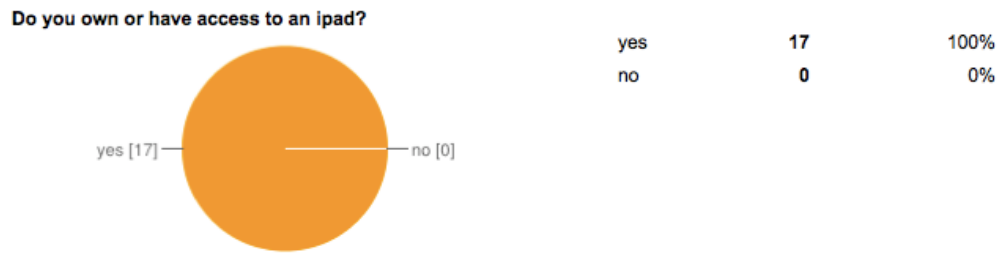
Appendix A
Student responses to “What is your nationality?”

What is your nationality?



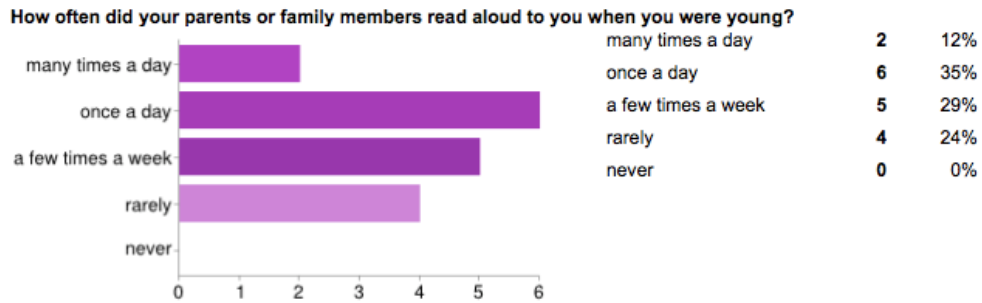
Qatari	15	88%
Palestinian	1	6%
Kuwaiti	0	0%
Egypt	0	0%
Other	1	6%

Appendix B
Student responses to “Do you own or have access to an ipad?”



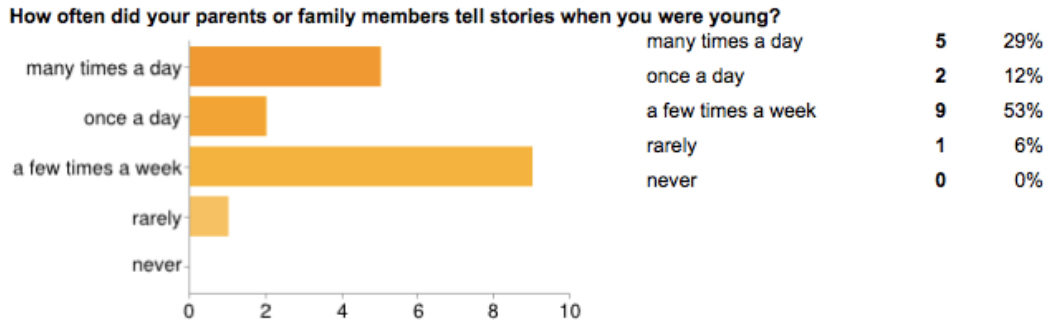
Appendix C

Student responses to “How often did your parents or family members read aloud to you when you were young?”



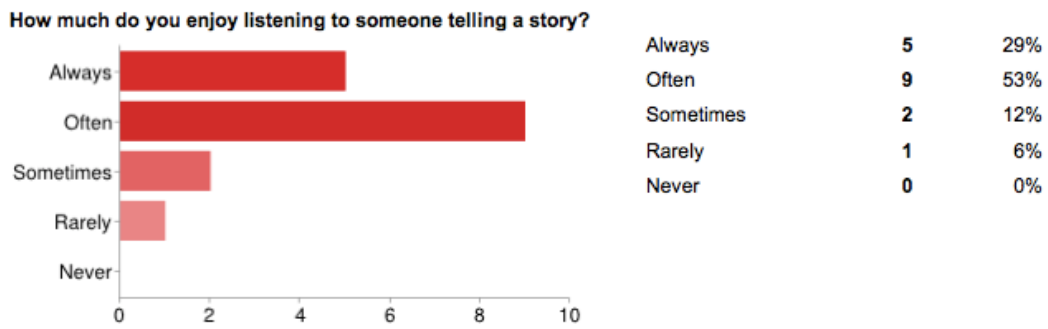
Appendix D

Student responses to “How often did your parents or family members tell stories when you were young?”



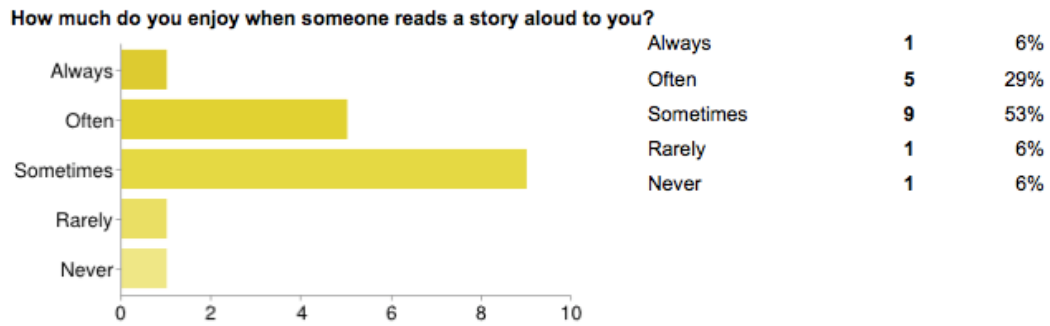
Appendix E

Student responses to “How much do you enjoy listening to someone telling a story?”



Appendix F

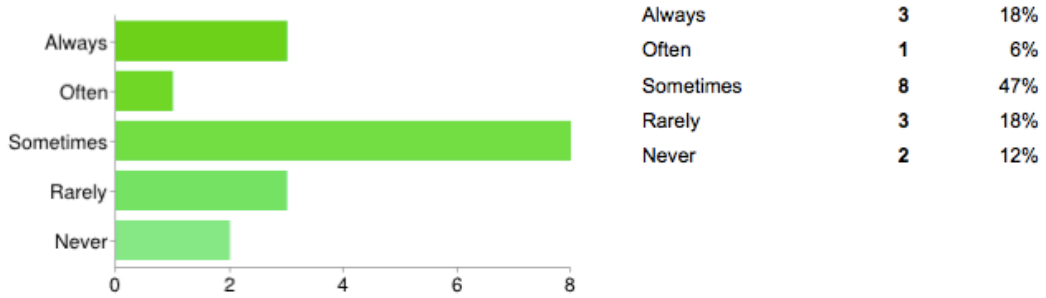
Student responses to “How much do you enjoy when someone reads a story aloud to you?”



Appendix G

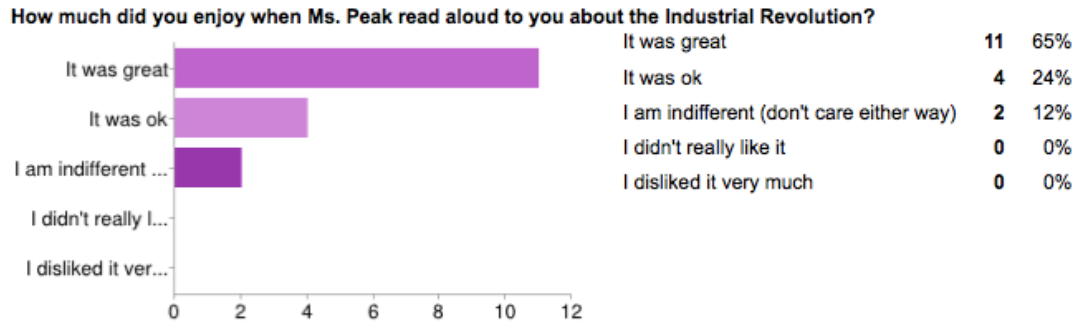
Student responses to “How much do you enjoy reading silently to yourself?”

How much do you enjoy reading silently to yourself?



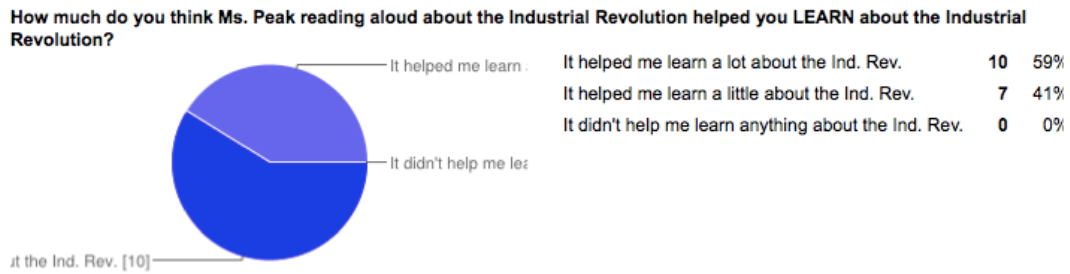
Appendix H

Student responses to “How much did you enjoy when Ms. Peak read aloud to you about the Industrial Revolution?”



Appendix I

Student responses to “How much do you think Ms. Peak reading aloud to helped you LEARN about the Industrial Revolution?”



Appendix J

Student responses to “Which do you prefer most: reading silently or being read aloud to?”

