Decisions, decisions: Responding to primary students during guided reading

**Guided reading lessons are a powerful context for beginning reading instruction, but providing immediate responses to students’ oral reading requires teachers to make complex and highly skilled decisions.**

Ms. Gallant glanced around the table at the six students in the guided reading group. The book introduction had gone well. The new book was a version of *The Three Little Pigs* (1976) story and everyone in the group was familiar with the basic story structure. Looking at a few of the pictures generated lots of discussion among the students and helped establish the basic story line for this version. As the students began to read the story quietly to themselves, Ms. Gallant turned toward Michael, who was seated on her left for today’s lesson (all scenarios are based on actual observations, but the names are all fictitious). She listened to him read the text and prepared to teach if an opportunity presented itself.

On page 7, Michael substituted *home* for *house* in the sentence “The big bad wolf went to the house of the first little pig.” Before he turned the page Ms. Gallant needed to make a decision, and quickly.

In her book, *Change Over Time in Children’s Literacy Development*, Clay (2001) argued that as teachers we need a complex theory of literacy learning and instruction to support the early progress of struggling students. She stated, “I am certain that a view of complexity is the kind of understanding required to deliver results in an early intervention programme aiming to prevent subsequent literacy difficulties in as many children as possible” (p. 138). Classroom teachers have fewer opportunities to work individually with struggling readers. Still, as guided reading plays a larger part in primary-classroom programs (Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), we need to make teaching decisions as we listen and respond to a beginning reader’s attempts to read leveled texts (Pinnell & Fountas, 1999).

This is a complex professional task. My experience working with primary teachers suggests they are often very comfortable providing guided reading lessons with rich book introductions (Clay, 1991a) that prepare students to understand the meaning and structure of leveled books. They also follow the reading of these texts with discussions that help to build comprehension and word-recognition knowledge. The task becomes more complex as teachers try to provide immediate feedback as they listen to one student or a group of students reading the story aloud. This is the type of guidance that many struggling readers need to construct problem-solving strategies on the run as they read. Guided reading lessons give us the opportunity to provide this type of support.

**What makes teaching decisions complex?**

Consider the factors involved in deciding how to respond to the substitution of *home* for *house*. A simple decision theory based on accuracy would say this error is always a problem to be corrected. A simple theory based on meaning might always ignore this type of miscue. A complex theory would base such a decision on previous observations of the student and an assessment of his or her literacy development.
Early in literacy learning, a student might read a patterned book (Cowley, 1987a, p. 10) containing the sentence “I’m going to build a house.” Given a meaningful introduction to the story, the student might read this text and attend to only a few print cues. One possible reading is “I’m going to make a home.” Teaching to a miscue of home for house in this context could eventually result in an accurate reading, but it is unlikely to facilitate processing strategies that carry over to other texts. Deciding to focus on the make/build substitution might be far more productive for this student. Most students learn to recognize gross visual differences among words before they attend to more subtle difference in the middle or end of words (Clay, 2001; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000).

The teaching decision would be very different for a student whose response history indicates that he or she always notices substitutions that change the initial letter–sound relationship and when stuck on a word will reread and generate a prediction based on meaning, sentence structure, and the initial visual cue. Attention to the substitution of home for house in The Three Little Pigs (1976) example may be an excellent opportunity to extend his or her strategies to include sound-to-letter expectations beyond the initial letter (Schwartz, 1997).

For a more advanced reader, who has demonstrated the ability to use a wide range of print cues, the substitution of home for house may again be worth ignoring. This miscue can represent the operation of a fluent reader whose eyes are working ahead of his or her voice as he or she focuses attention on constructing the meaning of the next section of text.

What are the factors that influence teaching decisions during a student’s oral reading of a new text? A.L. Brown (1982) used a tetrahedron as a conceptual framework to organize factors affecting reading and other complex cognitive tasks. This framework is one useful way to think about the combination of factors that influence our teaching decisions (see Figure 1).

Responding to students’ oral reading is a topic that has received much attention in instructional materials and research (see K.J. Brown, 2003, for a recent review of this literature). If you are familiar with this literature, the current framework provides a way to organize your knowledge about theory, observation, and instruction. The combination of factors included in this framework should challenge even the most experienced primary teachers to refine their decision process to support struggling readers. For less experienced teachers the framework provides an introduction to factors that affect these decisions. In the following sections, I explore how each of the four factors in Figure 1 (i.e., response history, cues, strategies, and prompt support level) contributes to a complex theory of literacy learning and instruction. In the final section I return to the question of how to use this type of complex theory to guide teaching decisions.

**Response history**

Guided reading procedures and natural language texts that are leveled to provide a gradient of difficulty allow students to successfully read meaningful books as they build knowledge of letters, words, and how they are combined to form simple messages and texts. Careful observation and analysis of errors that students make as they read these texts can provide information to guide our teaching decisions.

Why are errors so important? Reading educators and theorists (Clay, 1982; Goodman, 1969) have long recognized the value of error analysis as an assessment of a student’s developing strategies. Young students don’t attend to all the information in texts, even when they read accurately. Beginning
readers are extending the scope of information they can use. Analysis of the errors that a student makes and how the pattern of errors changes over time reflect developing processing strengths and strategies (Clay, 2001). Each error contains a partially correct response to the text. Focusing on the strengths reflected in the student’s errors lets us build on what the student can do and focus our teaching decisions to extend that processing system.

To respond quickly and effectively to teaching opportunities during oral reading, we need a tentative but elaborate theory of a particular student’s literacy development. Our analysis of the student’s response history provides this theory. As beginning readers develop effective processing systems for literacy we need to keep adjusting our decisions to their shifting pattern of responses. High-progress students challenge our ability to adjust theory and instruction quickly enough to provide instruction that is contingent on observed patterns of responses. The good news is that these students need far less of this type of instruction. High-progress readers benefit from whole-class and small-group instruction and a wide variety of literacy opportunities to build effective processing systems (Clay, 1991b, 2001). A small amount of contingent or scaffolded instruction can support their continued rapid learning.

Struggling readers are less likely to shift their processing strategies without direct support in the context where strategic action is required. This is one reason that isolated phonics instruction has often failed to result in improved performance. Students may build the knowledge base needed to support word recognition, but they fail to use this knowledge in the context of reading texts. Contingent instruction during oral reading can support struggling readers to apply their letter–sound knowledge in context (Clay, 2001).

Cues

Teaching decisions and our analysis of the student’s response history are further complicated by the number of different types of cues beginning readers may use, notice, or neglect in their reading of a text. Figure 2 displays some of the cues and knowledge sources that readers can use as they process a text (Schwartz, 1997).

Goodman (1969) has labeled his approach to error interpretation as “miscue analysis.” This is a particularly apt term because every error, or miscue, uses some set of cues and ignores others. The pattern of cues used, noticed, or neglected in prior attempts at text reading is a central part of the student’s response history and helps us decide the type of errors that might be most productive for future teaching.

The easiest leveled texts for guided reading lessons combine a repeated, single sentence pattern with high levels of meaning support from the pictures for any variation in the pattern. One such text begins “The cat sat on the mat” (Wildsmith, 1982, unpaged). This is followed by five more sentences that repeat the same pattern except for a change in the animal name. The illustrations provide cues to the animal mentioned in the sentence and ingeniously manage to convey a story of tension, conflict, and resolution to complement the simple language of the text.

An adult reader would quickly and automatically process the high-frequency words with little attention to other cue sources to aid word recognition. The adult would be able to easily think about the developing story and the clever illustrations and perhaps add dramatic intonation and phrasing if reading this story aloud to a group of students.

A guided reading lesson for this text might begin with the teacher explaining that the book is about a cat that likes to spend his time sitting on his mat, but he doesn’t like to share. On this page it says, “The cat sat on the mat.” Turning to the next illustration the teacher asks, “What do you think it says on this page?” Given a correct prediction, the student could be asked to read the rest of the text aloud. A student with good oral language, a sense of how this type of book works, and a strategy of examining the illustrations for new information could accurately read the remainder of the text (with the exception of the page where letters are used to convey the sound the cat makes to scare away the other animals).

This type of emergent reading doesn’t require a full analysis of the print, but it does provide opportunities for a student to notice, or a teacher to draw attention to, new or partially developed sources of information. A student might be learning how to match words in oral language with the directional conventions of print and an emergent concept of words in print (Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003). Another student might notice
high-frequency known words like *the* or *on*; the rhyming patterns in *cat*, *sat*, and *mat*; the sound-to-letter expectations for the initial letter in words like *dog* or *goat*; or the similarity of a known word, *how*, and a new word in this text, *cow*. All of these insights are possible, but most are probably inappropriate teaching points. An elaborate theory of the student, based on his or her previous response history, can guide a teacher’s instructional decisions to focus on extending the set of cues the student attends to.

Leveled texts try to take advantage of the strengths that students bring to the reading task. Many students’ greatest strengths are general knowledge from their immediate social environment and oral language ability. Other forms of beginning reading material focus attention on print, the least familiar aspect of the task for most beginning readers. These materials try to simplify the learning task by controlling the rate at which new reading vocabulary or letter–sound relationships are introduced into the materials. Picture cues are sometimes avoided in these materials to force attention to print, and many of the early materials can sound very artificial because of the limits imposed by control of vocabulary or sound relationships. These simple models of literacy learning and instruction give priority to one type of cue source. Simple models reduce the need for complex professional decisions, but they also provide only one route to literacy learning, and this route may not be effective for many students that struggle to construct an effective processing system for beginning reading (Clay, 1991b, 2001).

**Strategies**

An effective processing system for reading is made up of knowledge and mental strategies that are much more complex than the usual advice we give students. They take our advice, instruction, and their experience as readers to construct working systems that allow them to operate efficiently and effectively on increasingly complex texts (Clay, 2001). For beginning readers, two types of strategies that develop rapidly over the first few years are monitoring and searching strategies (Clay, 1991b; Schwartz, 1997).

Readers use searching strategies to generate an initial attempt to read a word and monitoring strategies to evaluate the attempt and initiate further searching if needed. Phonics, the use of context cues, and decoding by analogy are all forms of searching. They help students to make initial attempts to read words that are not recognized quickly as sight words. Searching strategies have played a major role in classroom reading programs and in the professional debate on early literacy instruction.

Monitoring strategies have received less attention. The opportunity to teach for monitoring strategies is often difficult to recognize. We need to let students make an error and allow enough time for them to notice their error independently. Usually this means at least letting students finish reading the sentence in which the error occurs. In a small-group read-aloud this might be impossible because the other students often interrupt the reading as soon as the error is made.

Whether to teach for monitoring or searching needs to become a more conscious part of the decision process when we listen to a student’s oral reading. If readers don’t notice errors that they make in oral reading (via monitoring strategies), they have no reason to search for additional cues or refine

---

**FIGURE 2**

Cues and knowledge sources to support monitoring and searching strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monitoring</th>
<th>Searching</th>
<th>Cross-checking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Picture</td>
<td>Context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence</td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Print cues (visual and phonological)
- One-to-one match
- Known words
- Gross visual features
- Initial letter(s)
- Final letter(s)
- Letter clusters

Sound-to-letter expectations

Meaning
- Picture
- Context

Sentence structure
- Oral language
- Book language

Key

Note: Reprinted from Schwartz (1997).
their searching strategies. Monitoring by a variety of cues to determine whether an attempt looks right and makes sense is a learning mechanism that drives students to refine their processing system.

Struggling readers often lack the feedback about their attempts that effective monitoring strategies can provide. Self-correction during oral reading is one observable indication of effective processing. Self-correction requires a combination of monitoring and searching strategies. Clay (1982) reported a marked difference in the self-correction rates for high- versus low-progress beginning readers.

Phonemic awareness has recently received considerable attention in the professional literature as a predictor of reading achievement. The mechanism by which phonemic awareness affects reading achievement is less clear (Morris et al., 2003). The hypothesized relationship seems to be that phonemic awareness supports the learning of searching strategies based on phonics. An additional or alternative mechanism is that phonemic awareness enables monitoring by sound-to-letter expectations that in turn lead to self-correction and increased independence in both monitoring and searching.

As shown in Figure 2, beginning readers may use searching strategies based on one cue source to generate a prediction and then cross-check that attempt with a prediction from another cue source. This is an early form of monitoring (Clay, 1993). A slightly more advanced reader might use multiple cue sources to generate a word-recognition attempt. The attempt provides expectations about sound-to-letter relationships that can be used to check whether the attempt matches additional print cues—a more complex form of monitoring.

For example, a beginning reader who is just learning how to gather information from print may use a searching strategy based on meaning and the initial visual cue to make the home for house substitution in The Three Little Pigs (1976). We could point to house and ask the student to sound it out, possibly resulting in an accurate response. This teaching sequence is unlikely to lead to increased self-corrections and independence because the student never noticed that her initial attempt conflicted with some of the available cues. Alternatively, we might allow the student to complete the sentence and then prompt, “That made sense, but check to see if it looks right.” If the student’s response history indicates that if she were asked to write a word like home she would include the major consonant sounds, then this prompt might be sufficient to help the student notice the discrepancy as she rereads the sentence, paying closer attention to the print (Clay, 1991b, 1993; Schwartz, 1997).

A large body of research evidence (Schwartz, 1980; Schwartz & Stanovich, 1981; Stanovich, 2000) indicates that adult readers, and even proficient younger readers, do not normally use meaning and structure cues to support word recognition while reading. This evidence suggests that effective readers recognize words based on rapid visual analysis while focusing attention on constructing meaning from the text. They continue to use meaning and structure cues to monitor this rapid visual processing but extend their strategies to include new forms of monitoring that operate at the message level and not just as a check on word recognition. This transition is a gradual process that continues well beyond a first-grade reading level.

Programs that encourage beginning readers to use cues from pictures and oral language structures to support word recognition in the easiest levels of text must ensure that students develop the knowledge and strategies of more proficient readers. We expect a change in a student’s searching strategies over time. Running record assessments let us track these changes over time in the student’s response history and plan our teaching decisions to support these changes (Clay, 2001, 2002; Schwartz, 1997).

Prompt support level

Even with a complex theory of literacy learning and instruction and a clear understanding of the student’s current processing, contingent teaching decisions during oral reading are a challenge. In the original work on scaffolding, Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) found that independent performance on a puzzle-building task was enhanced when parents followed a prompting rule based on the student’s response to previous prompts. The prompts varied in the level of adult support provided, increasing support when the student struggled and decreasing support when the student succeeded. Thus the scaffold, or support provided, was raised or lowered depending on immediate observation of performance to build independence on the task. Training graduate students to use these contingent rules with students was effective, but Wood (1988)
noted that responding appropriately was difficult even in this simplified problem domain.

Reading is a much more complex domain. As shown in Figure 1, after an analysis of the student’s response history, teachers need to decide what type of strategic processing to foster, what cues the student should use or notice, and how much support to provide for new learning. Teaching for independence requires a balance of all these factors in teaching decisions during reading. For example, if the student has made an error in oral reading, and, considering his or her response history, you feel there are cues that have been ignored that he or she should be able to notice, you might decide to prompt for self-monitoring. You still need to decide how much support to provide in that prompt. When the student completes the sentence or the page, showing no indication of noticing the error, you could ask, “Were you right?” (Clay, 1993, p. 41). This prompt, if not used exclusively when the student has made an error, encourages the student to monitor his or her reading consistently and independently. If you are trying to help the student extend the cues used for monitoring during reading, this prompt may not provide sufficient support for the student to notice the error. A higher level of support would be provided by a prompt that indicates what cues the student used in his or her response and what cues he or she ignored (i.e., “That makes sense; check to see if it looks right.”). If this more

---

**Decisions, decisions: Responding to primary students during guided reading**

**Teaching from a complex theory**

Listening to a student read a new or partially familiar text provides a variety of teaching opportunities. Decisions about when, what, and how to teach can be guided by the conceptual framework previously discussed and shown in Figure 1.

Table 1 lists a number of possible prompts (Clay, 1993) that respond to different readings of the text *Would You Like?* (Cowley, 1987b). In this story a boy is making a sandwich. On each page an animal suggests something to put on the sandwich. A cat says, “Would you like a mouse?” (p. 6). A lizard says, “Would you like a grasshopper?” (p. 8). In the example the pattern changes slightly with the addition of an adjective, *fat*. The table includes four possible substitutions for the word *fat*, along with various prompts for monitoring or searching and the type of support the prompt provides.

We can prepare to respond to a student by looking for patterns in the errors we observe in previous running records (Clay, 2002; Schwartz,
that substitutes lady for woman or purple for fat may be using meaning cues from the story or pictures to support initial attempts.

Second, look for a pattern in errors that the student notices versus those that are ignored. From these behaviors we can infer the types of cues the student uses to monitor his or her reading.

Many struggling readers may make substitutions like those mentioned above and keep right on reading with no sign of hesitation or doubt. They’ve used their searching strategy, and as far as they’re concerned it worked. A prompt at the end of the sentence may be sufficient to get them to reread using an additional cue source. This is teaching. What they can do with assistance they will eventually be able to do independently (Clay, 2001; Clay & Cazden, 1990).

Finally, when the student does notice an error, look for a pattern in the student’s responses at that point. From these responses we can infer the types of searching strategies used at difficulty. For too many struggling readers, their first and only searching attempt at difficulty is to look at the teacher for help. Prompt them to search in the text. Ask the student, “What could you try?” (Clay, 1993, p. 49).

Early strategies may involve rereading all or part of the sentence to combine meaning and sentence structure with some print cues. More advanced readers can retain the meaning while searching within the problem word for parts that are familiar from other known words.

The following is an example of what this analysis might involve. Sara’s reading of Baby Bear’s Present (Randell, 1994) shows 11 initial errors in the 206 words of text. Six of these errors are noticed and self-corrected, usually as she rereads the sentence from the beginning. Nine of her initial attempts combine meaning, the sentence structure up to the point of error, and the initial letter cue. For example, she used store for shop (twice), look for like, train for toy, move for make, and let’s for let. Of these initial errors only the store/shop substitution is left uncorrected. It could be that Sara uses meaning, structure, and initial visual cues for initial attempts and then monitors her attempts by additional visual cues, but it could also be that she accepts these initial attempts unless they conflict with the subsequent sentence structure. The store/shop substitution of course causes no conflict, but the other substitutions do conflict. For example, Please let’s sounds fine, but Please let’s me doesn’t sound right. In a similar manner, I can move it sounds fine, but before Sara reads the last word, go, she rereads the sentence and changes move to make.

Sara shows many strengths in her reading process, but she has more to learn. Her knowledge of visual cues will be enhanced and her processing more effective if she learns to monitor within words. She needs to learn how to check her attempts against visual cues in the target word based on sound-to-letter expectations from the attempt. Closer visual attention to monitor many successful and unsuccessful attempts should lead to faster visual searching strategies for her initial attempts, with less reliance on meaning and structure cues. This record analysis prepares me to look for opportunities to teach as I work with Sara in the future or to recognize her progress over time.

Effective support for all students

The guided reading lesson format provides a rich opportunity for teachers to observe and investigate early literacy. Listening to a student read a text that is only partially familiar allows us to apply and refine our theories of literacy learning and instruction. As classroom teachers arrange more opportunities to listen to and respond to developing readers, it would be useful to discuss your insights with teachers that work one-on-one with struggling readers. The contexts differ, so effective instruction in each setting will also differ, but discussion of teaching decisions that support students’ learning can help us better understand the complexity of literacy learning and instruction.

Close observation of students during oral reading also has the potential to help move our profession beyond the endless debate over the most effective searching strategy for initial reading instruction (Chall, 1967). Teaching for self-monitoring is at least as important as any particular searching strategy for many students (Schwartz, 1997). There are many different paths to proficient reading, but students who struggle with initial literacy learning need a guide to help keep them on their path (Clay, 1998).
In the opening scenario, Ms. Gallant has only a moment to decide how to respond to Michael’s reading. This decision process can be as complex as that engaged in by trial lawyers or emergency-room doctors. She needs to use her professional knowledge base and previous observation of the student to make moment-by-moment decisions that support one of the most culturally important and complex learning tasks. The challenge for all of us as teachers is to continue to refine our personal theories to a point where our teaching decisions can effectively support the literacy learning of all students.

Schwartz teaches at Oakland University (School of Education, Rochester, MI 48309-4494, USA). E-mail rschwart@oakland.edu.

References
The three little pigs: A British folk tale. (1976). In Reading unlimited, level 3 (pp. 2–26). Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman.