Columns

Struggling Emerging Literacy Learners: The Importance of Text Selection and Supportive Book Introduction

Jolene B. Reed, Ph.D.
Sam Houston State University—Texas

Abstract

For the majority of young learners, learning how to read comes relatively easily. However, some young children experience difficulty and require particularly specific thought and planning by the teacher. When early literacy behaviors are not securely evident in the struggling literacy learner, the teacher can support the development of those behaviors through selection of novel text and a book introduction that is tailored specifically to the needs of the learner experiencing problems. Specific attention needs to be paid to the types of information in the text that the young student is either utilizing or neglecting. The teacher needs to know the student well, including an awareness of specific high-frequency words that the student knows in either reading or writing. The teacher then can make decisions based on the knowledge base specific to the struggling emerging literacy learner. This article details how teaching decisions resulting from knowing a child's specific reading behaviors supports the struggling emerging literacy learner.

Keywords: emergent literacy, struggling reader, reading recovery

For the majority of young learners, learning how to read comes relatively easily. However, for some, the learning becomes tangled (Clay, 1982). It becomes the responsibility of teachers to provide the extra support needed to help the confused emerging literacy learner untangle misconceptions. Teachers can accomplish this by understanding what literary knowledge the young learner controls, supporting that young learner through a careful selection of text for the child to read, and then introducing that novel text in a manner that supports the child and ensures a successful first reading of the new text. This article will detail how a struggling emergent literacy learner can be supported by these three items. This will be accomplished through the example of Eric (all names are pseudonyms), a first-grade student who struggled to grasp that sometimes elusive thing that we call reading.

Eric was a first-grade student who had been placed in his school's Reading Recovery program. Reading Recovery (Clay, 2016) is an early intervention for first grade students who are having difficulty learning to read and write. Reading Recovery operates on the premise that students who get off to a

slower beginning in literacy development need accelerated instruction that will catch them up to the average band of their class. A specially trained teacher accomplishes acceleration in Reading Recovery through one-on-one tutoring for thirty minutes of daily reading and writing instruction. The goal is for the Reading Recovery student to make these accelerated gains in reading and writing during a relatively short (usually 12-20 weeks) period of time (Clay, 2016).

Eric's Reading Recovery teacher, Mrs. Hyde, became frustrated with his inconsistent performance in reading text. Looking for additional help to problem solve how to further support Eric, Mrs. Hyde asked that I (her Reading Recovery Teacher Leader) observe Eric in an effort to obtain an additional set of eyes in understanding Eric's reading behaviors. Mrs. Hyde stated that she found it difficult to determine exactly what Eric did and did not understand in reading. She further commented that he appeared to have an excellent memory for text. This memory for the repeated textual patterns that he heard during the book introduction allowed him to perform well on text that was simple, predictable, and patterned with supportive illustrations. Mrs. Hyde expounded on this observation by saying that Eric experienced difficulty when she asked him to read text that was simple and predictable, but unpatterned. Reading unpatterned text requires the reader to attend more closely to the visual information of the printed text. Eric's substitutions when reading unpatterned text were always meaningful and followed the storyline, but he did not appear to be using the high-frequency words that he knew how to write or the beginning letters of unknown words to self-monitor and self-correct his incorrect reading.

As Eric read his short books, I observed the same behaviors his teacher had described. The books he read were comprised of simple, repetitive texts and Eric's reading sounded phrased and fluent. The tonal quality of his voice contained the inflection of a reader. He was "talking like a book" (Clay, 2015, p. 77). But then he began doing something I found extremely interesting. He began reading rapidly—albeit accurately—quickly turning the pages of his book. I leaned in for a closer look and kept my gaze focused on his eyes. As he turned each page, his eyes stared steadfastly at the picture, never moving to concentrate on the print. What his teacher described in our conversation prior to Eric's reading lesson came back to my mind. She described him as having a good memory for the text, but not appearing to monitor his reading with words that he knew. I realized that he could not visually monitor what he was not looking at. I also wondered if Eric realized that it was the print and not the pictures that carried the message of the text (Barr, Blachowicz, & Wogman-Sadow, 1995, p.24).

I continued to watch as Eric and his teacher proceeded to the writing portion of their lesson. They engaged in a brief conversation where Eric described events of the prior evening when his grandmother helped him make a kite. After a short dialogue, Eric's teacher suggested that they write about a brief part of the conversation. Eric generated the sentence that he wanted to write: "Me and my sister and my grandma made our kites." He opened his writing journal, selected a purple marker as a writing instrument and began writing. For the next ten minutes, I was mesmerized as the teacher and student worked together to record Eric's message. Eric's eyes rarely left the page while the two of them were writing. I was fascinated as I

watched Eric's total involvement with print as he produced his story on the blank page in front of him. Eric wrote the first three words independently. He articulated and recorded the /s/ and /r/ in "sister". (The notation of a letter between slash marks such as /s/ denotes that the child articulated the sound. Notation of a letter in brackets such as <s> indicates that the name of the letter was spoken.) His teacher supplied what Eric was unable to record. In "grandma", Eric said that he could hear a <g> and an <m>. Again, his teacher wrote the parts that Eric did not state that he could hear. When he came to "made", Eric quickly and silently wrote "m", "a", and "d". His teacher placed the silent letter "e" at the end. For "our", Eric repeated the word and placed a solitary "r" on the paper. His teacher supplied the missing "o" and "u". Eric sounded /k/ as he wrote the "k" in "kites". His teacher finished the word.

Eric's teacher quickly wrote his sentence on a narrow strip of paper and then cut the words of the sentence apart. She asked Eric to reassemble the cut-up words to reformulate the sentence. Eric looked attentively at the small pieces of paper in front of him and began selecting each word needed to reconstruct his sentence. He quickly located "me", "and", and "my", placing them in the correct order. As Eric searched for each remaining word, he first stated the word softly and then began sounding the initial letter as his eyes attentively moved from one word to another until the word beginning with the correct letter was located. This process continued until his entire sentence was reconstructed. He completed the task independently. Not once did he appeal to his teacher for assistance.

I sat in my chair, spellbound by what just occurred. This child, identified by teachers as a struggling literacy learner, read three books with only minimal engagement of the print with his eyes. However, Eric's apparent passive approach toward print in the books changed to total involvement with print as he engaged in the writing task. During both the writing process and the reassembly of the cut-up sentence, Eric demonstrated that he was capable of monitoring and searching print for the high-frequency words that he had written independently as well as searching the initial letters of words to locate words not yet fully recognized by him.

The Importance of Early Reading Behaviors

One of the many things I have learned from working with children throughout my educational career is that they have just as much to teach us as educators as we have to teach them. What can be learned from this encounter with Eric? Eric demonstrated, through his interaction with text in writing that he had several strong understandings of how print works. First, he understood that print is meaningful when he generated the sentence that he wanted to write. He had an enjoyable experience with family members as they created and flew kites in the windy spring weather. With the simple message that he generated, he wished to convey a portion of that experience to his reader. Eric also demonstrated that he knew some high frequency words by recording them quickly as he wrote. Additionally, Eric demonstrated an understanding of the alphabetic principle as he recorded the dominant consonants heard in the words he wished to write. Knowing the sounds of letters also supported Eric as he searched for words he didn't recognize by

sight. He understood that sounding the first letter of the word he was searching for could help him locate the needed word as he reassembled a cut-up sentence.

The question for Eric's reading instruction became how to use what he knew and understood when he wrote to support his process of learning to read. How Mrs. Hyde selected the next text for Eric to read and how she introduced the text to Eric would be an important part of the answer to that question. Both teaching decisions had to occur based on the teacher's observations of what Eric knew and understood about novel text. Before she even selected Eric's next text, she had to first consider the early ready behaviors that Eric controlled: left to right directionality in reading, control of one-to-one matching when reading text, and using words he knows as anchors to check on his reading of novel text (Clay, 2016).

Eric demonstrated control of left to right directionality in both reading and writing. In reading, his finger moved across the page in a left to right direction as he read, verbalizing the text he was reading. In writing, Eric wrote his sentence in a left to right direction, leaving exaggerated white spaces between the words that he wrote. In writing, he also included a return sweep to the left of the blank page when he needed to do so to complete his sentence.

Eric's control of one-to-one match (realizing that for each word printed on the page, one word needed to be spoken orally) was not obvious based on Eric's reading in the aforementioned scenario. Eric's finger had slid across the page in one smooth movement. His eyes looked only at the picture as he read, while his mouth echoed the repeated pattern that he knew went with the text, altered only with the change that was represented in the picture. A crisp pointing with his finger to each word as it

was read would have indicated that Eric understood that a single printed word required that a single word be spoken orally. However, Eric's lack of crisp finger pointing did not necessarily mean that he did not understand the concept of one-to-one match. There simply was not enough information based on his reading alone to decide whether Eric understood this early literacy concept.

Eric's writing, however, did give some additional insight. The very act of writing caused Eric to slow down his literacy processing behavior as he wrote each word of his sentence. This unhurried act of recording each word is what would allow adult observers to better understand how Eric looked at print. As he slowly articulated individual words and then recorded what he heard, he provided evidence that he understood the relationship between letters and words. As he left spaces between each word in his writing, he further indicated that he was at least beginning to grasp the concept of one-to-one match in print.

Lacking in Eric's reading performance was the use of words he knew as anchors to check on his reading in novel text. This was evidenced when his eyes stared steadfastly at the illustration as he read and never moved from the picture to the printed words in the text. Eric was reading accurately. However, that accurate reading was based on his memory for text, rather than any behavior of checking to ascertain if the printed text looked like the words he stated. Eric needed text that, while still highly repetitive, reinforced a need for Eric to check the printed word against what he heard as he read orally.

The Importance of Text Selection

The challenge for Mrs. Hyde became one of helping Eric to use what he knew and understood in writing to support his reading novel text. Simultaneously, she needed to help Eric understand the importance of attending to the print of the text while reading. The selection of the next text for Eric to read was crucial. From Eric's writing sample, it was clear that he knew at least three high frequency words: "me", "and", and "my". Eric's teacher had also previously administered the Ohio Word Test (Clay, 2005) as a quick determination of sight words that Eric recognized. On this assessment, Eric had correctly read the words "the", and "and". His teacher had also administered Clay's (2005) Observation Task for Writing Vocabulary. In this assessment, the student is asked to write all the words they know within a ten-minute time limit. During this assessment, Eric had written the words "I", "a", "mom", "dad", and his name. Knowing specifically which words Eric controlled in reading and in writing and that Eric needed a repeated text pattern with highly supportive illustrations in reading novel text aided Mrs. Hyde as she looked through various texts to select Eric's next book to read.

In selecting his next book, it was imperative that Mrs. Hyde keep in mind specifically what Eric already knew and what he needed to control next. Eric's teacher's greatest concern was that he did not appear to be attending to the text of the story as he read. Armed with the knowledge of words he knew and that his next book needed to have a slightly varied text pattern, Mrs. Hyde needed to find a book that would support Eric by using what he already knew, and also encouraging new learning by asking him to perform something that was on the upper cusp of his Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). After careful consid-

eration, Mrs. Hyde selected the book, *Danny Likes Red* by Mia Coulton (2003). She made this choice because the text was generally patterned and contained the highly supportive illustrations that Eric still relied on. The significant difference in this text was that each page contained slight variations in pattern. However, those changes were in words that Eric had shown he knew and controlled. Accurate reading would require that Eric attend to the print on the page and use what he knew. At the same time, supportive illustrations would help Eric with what he did not yet control.

The text (Coulton, 2003, pp. 2-10) read in part:

> A leaf is red. (The illustration shows a dog, Danny, with a red leaf on his head.)
>
> My ball is red. (The illustration shows Danny with a red ball in front of him.)
>
> The apple is red. (The illustration shows Danny with a red apple on his head.)
>
> The bow is red. (The illustration shows Danny with a red bow on his head.)
>
> My scarf is red. (The illustration shows Danny wearing a red scarf around his neck.)

Selection of this text was on the upper cusp of Eric's learning because it provided Eric just the right amount of support to let him read the text accurately. However, the

intermingling of the words "a", "my", and "the" would force Eric to attend to the print as he read. The illustrations still supported the words that Eric could not yet read conventionally, but the slight changes in text would require that Eric attend to the print and use just a quick glance at the illustrations to supply the unknown word in the sentence.

The Importance of the Text Introduction

Once Eric's teacher had selected a new book for him, it was extremely important that she set him up for success in reading the text by giving him a supportive book introduction. Clay (2016) states that "The first reading of the new book is not a test. It needs to be a successful reading. Prepare the child for correct responding on the first encounter by introducing the language and the ideas through oral conversation (p. 115)." In preparing Eric to successfully read this particular book, Mrs. Hyde needed to ensure that Eric was familiar with how the book worked, including any terms or concepts that would be unfamiliar to him.

In planning book introductions, it is helpful for any teacher to follow some general guidelines that Mrs. Hyde followed when she planned the book introduction for Eric. Of course, each book introduction must be unique and the guidelines Mrs. Hyde followed must be tweaked to meet the needs of the individual text and the unique needs of the learner.

First, Mrs. Hyde needed to ensure that Eric understood the gist of the text's storyline. This needed to be brief, just long enough to give him an idea of what the book would be about and how the book worked. Mrs. Hyde then asked herself if there were any vocabulary words or concepts with which Eric might not be familiar. From looking through the above-mentioned book, Mrs. Hyde decided that Eric

might not be familiar with the word "scarf". She knew she needed to draw attention to that word in her introduction to the text. Finally, Mrs. Hyde wanted to plant the language of the text in Eric's mind, again setting him up for a successful first reading of the unfamiliar text. With these elements in mind, the book introduction for *Danny Likes Red* (Coulton, 2003) sounded something like this:

"This book is about a dog named Danny who likes the color red. He is going to show you some red things. Let's look through the book and see what the red things are." Mrs. Hyde and Eric then looked through the book together to see what objects Danny would be showing the young reader. When they come to the page with the scarf, Mrs. Hyde pointed out through natural conversation that the thing around Danny's neck was called a scarf. Mrs. Hyde then invited Eric to locate the word "scarf" in the text. She provided some additional support by asking Eric what letter he might expect to see at the beginning of the word "scarf". After Eric located the word, Mrs. Hyde had him run his finger under the word as he articulated the word slowly, allowing him to notice how the sounds he articulated when saying the word aligned with the letters he saw in the written word. Once the two of them had looked at the pictures and discussed the word "scarf", Mrs. Hyde invited Eric to read. With this introduction, Eric had the information needed to help ensure success on the first reading.

Just prior to Eric's beginning to read the new text, Mrs. Hyde reminded him that he needed to look at the words as he read. She had Eric locate the words "a", "my", and "the" on the first three printed pages of the text. She told Eric that these three words would be changing at the beginning of each

page that he read and that the only way to know which word would be used was to look closely at the beginning word and then use what he knew to accurately read each page. With this supportive book introduction, Eric was successful on his first reading of the new text. His reading slowed somewhat from the rate at which he read previous text, but the slower rate was the result of taking extra time to look at the words, rather than repeat the patterned text from memory. Even with this slightly reduced reading rate, Eric's reading of the text was still fluent as he parsed the words on each page appropriately.

Careful text selection and a good book introduction makes the new text more accessible to the struggling emerging literacy learner. To facilitate the child's success, however, the teacher must carefully consider the specific reading behaviors of the individual student and then plan accordingly. To have the child reading novel text with a high degree of successful processing should always be the goal of reading teachers. Careful text selection and a quality book introduction provides the struggling literacy learner with the needed scaffold to experience the success that comes with initiating the needed work to problem solve on unknown text. Vygotsky (1978) tells us that the teacher, as the more knowledgeable other, possesses the ability to lift the student's learning to a higher plane. Careful text selection and a supportive book introduction are tools that teachers can utilize to accomplish that feat.

References

Barr, R., Blachowicz, C. L. Z., Wogman-Sadow, M. (1995). *Reading diagnosis for teachers: An instructional approach* (3rd ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.

Clay, M. M. (1982). *Observing young readers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Clay, M. M. (2005). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement* (3rd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Clay, M. M. (2014). *By different paths to common outcomes: Literacy learning and teaching.* Auckland, NZ: Global Education Systems.

Clay, M. M., (2015). *Becoming literate: The Construction of inner control.* Auckland, NZ: Global Education Systems.

Clay, M. M., (2016). *Literacy lessons designed for individuals* (2nd ed.). Auckland, NZ: Global Education Systems.

Coulton, M., (2003). *Danny likes red.* Beachwood, OH: MaryRuth Books.

Vygotsky. L. S., (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
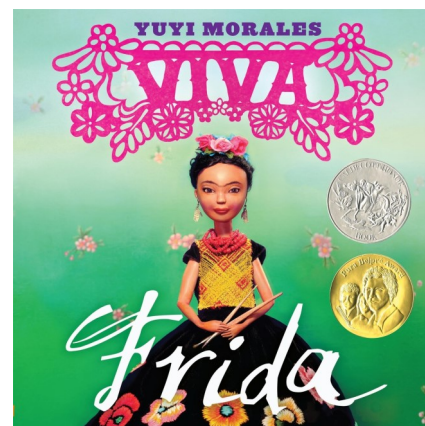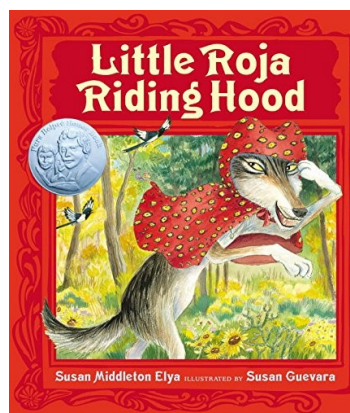
Author's Biography

Jolene Reed is an assistant professor in the Department of Language, Literacy and Special Populations at Sam Houston State University. She has previously been an elementary classroom teacher, a Reading Recovery teacher and teacher leader, and a K-5 literacy coordinator. She currently teaches courses in literacy. Her research interests include: emergent literacy, struggling readers, and teacher preparation.

Correspondence

All correspondence should be sent to Jolene Reed at jreed@shsu.edu or Sam Houston State University, Box 2119, Huntsville, TX 77340. Voice calls should be made to 936-294-1112.