What Do I Say When They Get Stuck on a Word? Aligning Teachers' Prompts with Students' Development

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Source: *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 56, No. 8 (May, 2003), pp. 720-733
Published by: Wiley on behalf of the International Literacy Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20205283
Accessed: 23-10-2017 18:22 UTC

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What do I say when they get stuck on a word? Aligning teachers' prompts with students' development

Just as teachers align text type and word study with development, they can align the type of assistance they offer when students encounter unfamiliar words.

Even casual observation reveals that primary-grade classrooms in the United States are populated by students with diverse levels of reading ability. This diversity raises serious challenges for teachers as they plan instruction. To effectively meet these challenges, teachers must develop a clear sense of "where their students are" as readers. They need to identify each child's zone of proximal development: the place where that child can operate almost, but not quite, as an independent reader (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). In reading parlance, this is the instructional level: reading with 90% or better accuracy, at least 70% comprehension, and with a satisfactory rate of speed (Leslie & Caldwell, 2001; Morris, 1999b; National Reading Panel, 2000). Implicit in both constructs is the assumption that reading instruction happens at the "cutting edge" of development. In this way, teachers can ensure that young readers experience ongoing success with just enough ongoing challenge. This delicate instructional balance helps beginning readers meet challenges and move forward.

To work at the cutting edge of children's reading development, primary-grade teachers need to ask some important questions about materials and curriculum. At the most basic level, these questions can include, "What kind of text is best for this child at this particular point in reading development?" and "What kind of word study is most appropriate for this child right now?" Another less obvious but still important question is, "What kind of word-recognition prompts should I be using with this child at this developmental level? That is, when the child comes to an unfamiliar word and starts to struggle, what should I do?"

Why are word-recognition prompts important?

Word-recognition prompts are a ubiquitous yet somewhat unrecognized part of reading instruction. Even the most advanced beginners make oral reading errors when reading at instructional level. When readers make errors, primary-grade teachers often respond with assistance in the form of prompts. Usually, these are prompts like "Sound it out"; "What makes sense there?"; and "Do you see any chunks or word parts that can help you?" Teachers often use prompts "on the fly" as they listen to students read aloud and, as such, might not consider them part of formal reading instruction. Nevertheless, as innocuous as word-recognition prompts seem, they are a form of instruction. Their consistent use may well influence students' reading behavior.

Consider the following examples. When one teacher consistently prompts beginning readers to use picture cues to guess at unfamiliar words, students may conclude, "When I come to a word I don't know, I should look at the picture and make a guess." When another teacher consistently prompts beginning readers to use letter-sound correspondences to blend unfamiliar words, students in that classroom may conclude, "When I come to word I don't know, I should sound it out." As these students encounter unfamiliar words in the absence of their teachers, they may recall and employ those prompts. Over time, use may become routine. Thus, word-recognition prompts have the potential to shape young readers' reactions to unfamiliar words.

Research on word-recognition prompts

Despite their potential instructional importance, word-recognition prompts have received scant attention in research, practitioner, and teacher-education literature. A search of related journals through ERIC and PsycInfo for the years 1980 to 2000 yielded only 12 articles related to this topic. Data from several empirical studies suggested that poor readers encountering unfamiliar words were much more likely to be interrupted quickly by teachers than their higher achieving peers. Most often, the interruption consisted of the teacher simply providing the correct word (Allington, 1980; Hoffman & Clements, 1984; Hoffman et al., 1984; Pflaum, Pascarella, Boskwick, & Auer, 1980). In response, researchers recommended that teachers ensure that all students—especially low-achieving students—read at their instructional levels and delay interruptions until a phrase or sentence break, allowing students the opportunity for self-correction (Hoffman & Clements, 1984; Hoffman et al., 1984; McNaughton, 1981; Taylor & Nosbush, 1983).

Teachers' materials and word-recognition prompts

Word-recognition prompts receive greater, but still limited, attention in teachers' materials such as methods textbooks, basal-program guides, and manuals. An examination of approximately two dozen commercial materials (see Sidebar for a complete list) indicated that the topic often was not addressed at all. Some materials did include "sample prompts" for teachers to use with students, and some of them were designed to reinforce a particular approach to word recognition, such as code oriented or holistic. Other materials simply provided a list of prompts and described their potential use without direction as to when they were most appropriate.

Code-oriented materials are grounded in the assumption that successful word recognition for beginning readers comes through close attention to letter-sound correspondences, which, over time, builds automaticity (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1979, 1983, 1996; McCandless, Beck, Sandak, & Perfetti, in press; Perfetti, 1991). It is not surprising that word-recognition prompts in code-oriented materials are designed to encourage beginning readers to blend sounds into words (see Figure 1). Prompts across code-oriented programs vary somewhat, but the message is clear: When encountering an unfamiliar word, beginning readers should blend the sounds together to generate a pronunciation. With repetition, that word's visual and phonological representations will bond and become more established in a young reader's memory. The word and its pronunciation are eventually recognized on sight—quickly, accurately, and effortlessly (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 1998; Perfetti, 1991, 1992; Sinatra & Royer, 1993; Stanovich, 1991; Stanovich & West, 1989)

In contrast, holistic materials are grounded in the assumption that successful word recognition for a reader comes through reliance on various "cues" in the text and on the reader's own prior knowledge. The cuing system includes semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, and graphophonemic (i.e., letter-sound) information that beginning readers draw on in a strategic manner as they negotiate unfamiliar words (Cambourne, 1995; Goodman, 1993; Smith, 1979; Weaver, 1994). It is important to note that among holistic approaches, letter-sound information is not prioritized—despite a robust body of research indicating that expert readers excel at using this resource (for reviews, see Adams, 1990; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 2000). In fact, using letters and their sounds—especially vowels—usually is prompted after other more contextually based types of information (i.e., semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic) have been

Commercial materials examined

Bear, D.R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2000). *Words their way: Word study for phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Cooper, J.D. (1993). *Literacy: Helping children construct meaning* (2nd ed.). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Fountas, I.C., & Pinnell, G.S. (1996). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fox, B.J. (2000). *Word identification strategies: Phonics from a new perspective* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Froese, V. (1991). *Whole language: Practice and theory.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Graves, M.F., Juel, C., & Graves, B.B. (1998). *Teaching reading in the 21st century.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Harcourt reading/language arts program. (2001). *Collections, level 1, book 1: Together again.* San Diego, CA: Author.

Harcourt reading/language arts program. (2001). *Collections, level 1, book 5: Set sail.* Harcourt: San Diego, CA.

Heilman, A.W. (1993). *Phonics in proper perspective* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

McGee, L.M., & Richgels, D.J. (2000). *Literacy's beginnings: Supporting young readers and writers* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Moats, L.C. (2000). *Speech to print: Language essentials for teachers.* Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

Morrow, L.M. (1997). *Literacy development in the early years: Helping children read and write.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Pressley, M. (1998). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching.* New York: Guilford.

Rinsky, L.A. (1997). *Teaching word recognition skills* (6th ed.). Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick.

Routman, R. (1996). *Literacy at the crossroads: Crucial talk about reading, writing, and other teaching dilemmas.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Routman, R. (2000). *Conversations: Strategies for teaching, learning, and evaluating.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Shefelbine, J. (1997). *Scholastic phonics readers books 1–36: Teacher's guide.* New York: Scholastic.

Soderman, A.K., Gregory, K.M., & O'Neill, L.T. (1999). *Scaffolding emergent literacy: A child-centered approach for preschool through grade 5.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

SRA/McGraw-Hill. (2000). *Open court reading level 1, book 1: Games/folktales.* Worthington, OH: Author.

Tierney, R.J., Readence, J.E., & Dishner, E.K. (1995). *Reading strategies and practices: A compendium* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Tompkins, G.E. (2001). *Literacy for the 21st century: A balanced approach* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Weaver, C. (1994). *Understanding whole language: From principles to practice* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

exhausted. Consistent with these assumptions, prompts in holistic materials encourage beginning readers to identify unfamiliar words by using different cues until they find success (see Figures 2 and 3). Holistic prompts vary somewhat but the message is again clear: When encountering unfamiliar words, beginning readers should use the multiple cues and strategies at their disposal—not just letter-sound knowledge.

Not all teacher materials present a unified message in their suggestions for word-recognition prompts. Some provide a veritable "laundry list" of prompts that include such suggestions as "Ask someone to help you," "Put in another word that makes sense," "Sound it out," and "See if you can find a chunk to help you." When examining these highly eclectic materials (see Figure 4), teachers may be inclined to ask, "Which prompt is best? Should I suggest several different prompts? If so, which ones? Are they all equally effective?"

How young readers change their approach to the reading process

The word-recognition prompts in teacher materials—whether they be code oriented, holistic, or eclectic—are designed to be helpful; nevertheless, many fail to address a student's level of reading development. To offer students the most effective assistance with troublesome words, teachers should ask themselves which type of prompt is most appropriate for a reader at this point in his or her development. Because beginners make some fairly dramatic changes in how they approach the reading process over time, teachers need to commensurately change their word-recognition prompts.

This developmental perspective on word-recognition prompts is grounded in a robust body of research on beginning reading (Biemiller, 1970, 1977/1978; Ehri, 1998; Frith, 1985; Gough, Juel, & Griffith, 1992; Juel, 1991; Morris, 1992, 1993; Stanovich, 2000) and spelling (Ehri & Wilce, 1987b; Henderson, 1981, 1992; Morris & Perney, 1984; Read, 1971). This research suggests that development is reflected in how beginners approach unfamiliar words. More specifically, when beginning readers make oral reading and spelling errors, those errors illuminate where they are as readers, and where they are going next.

Figure 1
Example of code-oriented word-recognition prompt

The purpose of blending is to teach children a strategy for figuring out unfamiliar words.... By blending words sound by sound, children learn the blending process, which allows them to work out for themselves the words they meet in their reading. (p. 24)

Phonics

Remind those children who are having difficulty reading to blend unfamiliar or difficult words (p. 36).

Note. Reprinted from *Open Court Reading, level 1, book 1: Games/folktales* (2000) by permission of SRA/McGraw-Hill.

It is important to note that beginning readers cannot and do not approach the reading process like experts do. Beginners lack a fundamental resource that experts have at their disposal: word-recognition automaticity. Consequently, beginners rely on several well-documented, but not always reliable, compensatory strategies, for example use of word-shape cues or sound blending. Beginners do not randomly use these compensatory strategies. In fact, they apply them in fairly predictable ways, depending on where they are in their development as readers (Chall, 1983; Ehri, 1998; Juel, 1991).

At the outset, beginning readers who lack letter-sound knowledge must rely, by default, on context, memory, pictures, and word shape. Consequently, beginners' reading and spelling errors often bear little resemblance to the word they are trying to decipher (e.g, pointing to the word *mountains* under a photograph and saying "Grand Tetons," or writing "KdooHL" when the intent is "Welcome home Dad!"). However, as beginning readers learn to apply the alphabetic principle, they increasingly attend to letters and sounds, and their errors reflect this (e.g., reading "mants" for the word *mountains* or writing "wlcm hom dad" for a returning parent). As larger and larger chunks of orthography and matching pronunciations become bonded in memory, more advanced beginners produce errors that more closely resemble the kinds of errors expert readers make (e.g., reading "moun-tanes," then recognizing that there is no such word and shifting the pronunciation to produce "mountains" or writing "Wellcome home Dad!").

Thus, learning to read words is more than simply becoming faster and more accurate. Beginning readers do qualitatively different things at different points in their development. They make predictable, discernible changes in how they approach the reading process. With this developmental progression in mind, it makes theoretical and practical sense to suggest that teachers align the content of their instruction to target the cutting edge of students' development. And, just as teachers align text type and word study with development, they can align the type of assistance they offer when students encounter unfamiliar words. This means that the same word-recognition prompts that are appropriate for emergent readers (e.g., What's the first sound? Now, look at the picture.") often are not appropriate for more advanced beginners (e.g., "Do you see a chunk you know in that word?") and vice versa.

In the interest of providing some guidelines for teachers interested in refining their technique in this area, the remainder of this article describes how one first-grade teacher, Jean, aligns word prompts with students' reading development. (Jean is a composite character who represents the exceptional primary-grade teachers the author has been privileged to know.)

Every year, children with very different levels of print knowledge populate Jean's classroom. She uses guided-reading groups to handle this high variability in reading development. When she works with small groups of four to eight students at similar levels, Jean is able to effectively scaffold text, word study, and prompts. She organizes groups along three general developmental lines: students who are primarily "learning about print," those who are "breaking the code," and more advanced beginners who are "increasing fluency" (see Figure 5). (The students described here also are composite characters who represent beginning readers encountered by the author and her colleagues in classroom and tutoring settings.)

Figure 2
Example of a holistic-oriented word-recognition prompt

Corrective cues hierarchy
Use these cues, in order given, until the student reads word correctly.

1. "Try another way."
2. "Finish the sentence and guess the word."
3. "Break the word into parts and pronounce each one."
4. Point to parts of word and ask reader to decode each part.
5. "What sound does ____ make?"
6. "The word is _____."

Note. Reprinted from McCoy, K.M., & Pany, D. (1986). Summary and analysis of oral reading corrective feedback research. *The Reading Teacher, 39*, p. 549.

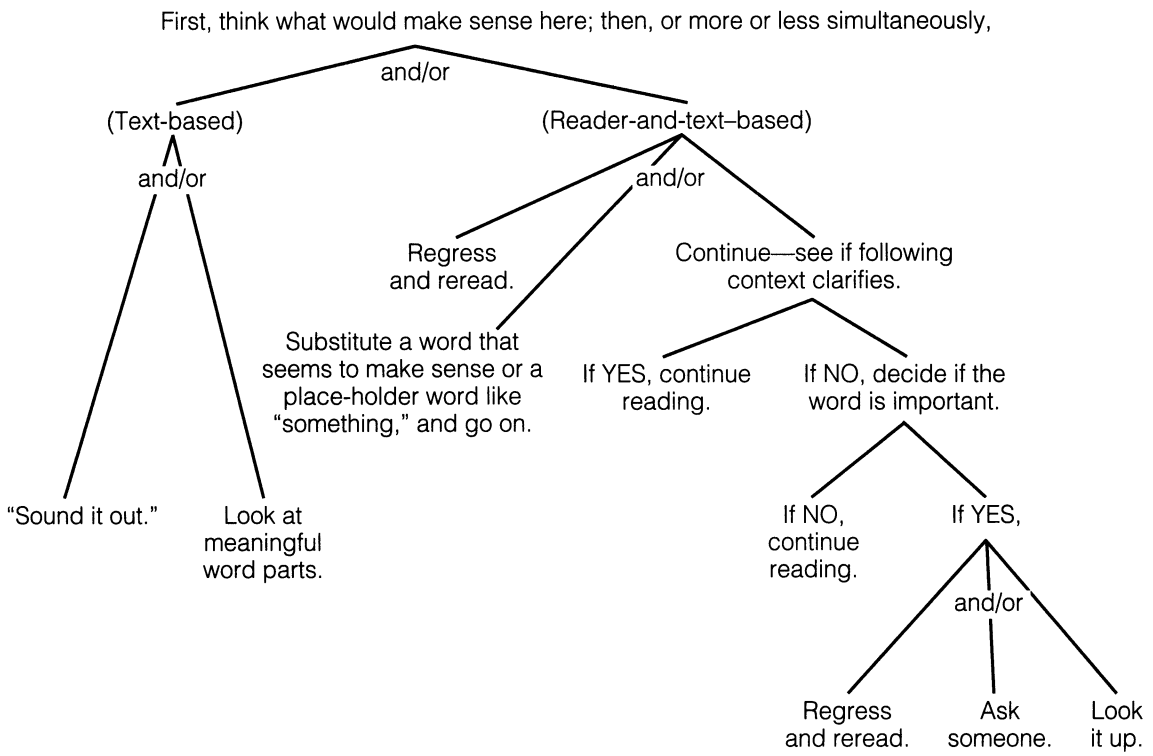
Word prompts for learning about print

Jean knows that for children with few book experiences, it is critical to build print awareness (Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). This includes understanding that print carries meaning and that books in English work from front-to-back, left-to-right, and top-to-bottom. Beyond these basics, beginning readers need to learn how to "track print," that is, to match spoken words to written words as they "finger point" their way through text. Morris (1992, 1993) described this ability as "concept of word" and suggested that it is a critical prerequisite for learning to decode. More specifically, the ability to target individual words in running text is an important step toward using the most rudimentary of decoding strategies: first-letter sound. Consider the following example. Emergent readers who can finger point their way accurately through a rereading of an easy, predictable book like *Moms and Dads* (Randell, 1996) have a valuable resource at their disposal when they encounter the sentence "Mom is a librarian." If pictures, context, and memory fall short after students read "Mom is a...," but they have succeeded in making a one-to-one match between voice and print, they can use /l/ in combination with the picture and their memories to generate the word *librarian*. Students can do this because they know exactly where they are in the text. In contrast, emergent readers who have not finger pointed, or have done so without attention to individual words, will not be sure where they are in that "sea of text." Adrift without bearings, they cannot effectively use their letter-sound knowledge. As a result, opportunities to reinforce the use of that knowledge are lost.

Jean knew that developing the concept of word was a critical benchmark for students in the learning about print group. When Dwayne, Cody, Lateisha, and Carla started first grade, they were not yet decoding; in fact, they had not mastered basic letter-sound relationships. When they reread familiar, predictable books, they seemed clear on directionality, but their finger pointing frequently was off-track. To develop concept of word, reinforce letter-sound connections, and give these students a taste of "reading-on-your-own" success, Jean used simple, predictable books during guided reading time (Clay, 1993; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Hiebert & Raphael, 1998; Morris, 1999a). Every day, she "echo read" a new book with the group, carefully tracking the print with her finger as she read aloud with expression. After each page, the students echoed the reading and finger pointed the same section of text in their own copies. Jean occasionally modeled "getting stuck on a word" and how she used the beginning sound and the illustration to figure it out. Next, the children read the book with a partner and then independently.

It is not surprising that students in the learning about print group sometimes "got lost" when they read on their own. When that happened, Jean used word-recognition prompts that targeted this particular level of reading development (see Figure 6). For example, while rereading *If You Meet a Dragon...* (Cowley, 1995), Dwayne had difficulty finger pointing the simple pattern "Tickle his back. Tickle his nose. Tickle his legs. Tickle his toes..." (pp. 2–5). As she watched, Jean noticed that Dwayne was being led astray by the two syllables in *tickle*. Because he moved

Figure 3
Example of a holistic-oriented word-recognition prompt



Note. Adapted from Weaver, C. (1990). *Understanding whole language: From principles to practice,* p. 15. Reprinted by permission of Heinemann.

his finger ahead whenever he uttered the second syllable, he consistently ended with "more words in his mouth" than on the page. Jean surmised that Dwayne was struggling with the fundamental concept that words are not necessarily bound by syllable beats. To scaffold Dwayne toward this important insight, Jean intervened with a "pointing prompt." She said, "Watch me, Dwayne. This whole word is 'tickle.' You hear the two beats and that's messing you up." She then pointed her finger very deliberately under the word as she said it aloud, paused briefly, and then continued with the remainder of the sentence. After modeling two pages of running text with an emphatic pause each time the troublesome word occurred, she asked Dwayne to try it on his own (Morris, 1999a). The next day, Jean noticed that Dwayne's success carried over into a polysyllabic word in another text. He told her, "Look, teacher! I have to keep my finger under 'grasshopper' for a long time!"

As Jean observed the learning about print group over the next several weeks, she saw them make considerable progress in establishing consonant letter-sound connections. They became increasingly adept at using this knowledge to read and spell the first-letter sound in unfamiliar words (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2000; Morris, 1999a). One day, while rereading *Can You Find It?* (Casey, 1997), another easy and predictable text, Jean watched as Dwayne confidently and accurately reproduced the refrain "Can you find the (*cat*), (*frog*), (*crab*)?" (pp. 2–4) over several pages of text. However, on a subsequent page, Dwayne just as confidently produced an error, saying "wolf" when, in fact, the text read "Can you find the *fox*?" (p. 5). Seconds later, Carla made a similar

Figure 4
Examples of eclectic word-recognition prompts

Guided Reading
What Good Readers Do
Use Word Order and Context to Confirm Meaning
After children read page 50, have them use their hands to frame the word *Look*.

Model: If I came to the word *Look* and I couldn't read it, I would say the whole sentence without the word and try to think of a word that would make sense in the sentence _____ *at me now*. I think *Look* would make sense with the rest of the words in the sentence: *Look at me now* (p. 156).

Guided Reading
What Good Readers Do
Look for Words You Know
After children read page 128 have them frame the word *wall* with their hands.

Model: I do not know this word, but I do know the word *all*. Look at the picture to see where he is sitting. The word starts with *w*, so it must be *wall* (p. 372).

Note. Reprinted by the permission of the publisher from Harcourt reading/language arts program: *Collections, level 1, book 1: Together Again.* (2001).

Guided Reading
What Good Readers Do
Look for Word Bits and Parts
Point out that when children come to an unfamiliar word they should look for parts of the word that they know.

- What word do you see in the part of the word *digging*? (*dig*)
- What two words make up the word *anything*? (*any* and *thing*)
- What two words make up the word *something* (*some* and *thing*)

(p. 292)

Note. Reprinted by the permission of the publisher from Harcourt reading/language arts program: *Collections, level 1, book 5: Set Sail.* (2001).

error, saying "dog" instead of "fox." This pattern of errors—semantically appropriate, but bearing little orthographic resemblance to the actual word—indicated that Dwayne and Carla were not using letter-sound knowledge to negotiate this section of the text. Their behavior is consistent with Ehri's (1998) description of "pre-alphabetic" readers. These readers may not yet have acquired sufficient letter-sound knowledge, may lack awareness of how to use that knowledge, or may simply forget to attend carefully to print. As a result, they use whatever compensatory strategies are at hand—pictures, word shape, prior knowledge, memory, and context—to identify unknown words.

Jean suspected that Dwayne and Carla were not attending carefully to the print. With this in mind, she consciously adjusted her prompt to focus on first-letter sound. "Wait a minute," she interjected after they made the "wolf" and "dog" errors, resting her pencil point under the *f* in *fox*, "Look at this word again. First sound?" Dwayne and Carla obliged with the appropriate response, "/f/." "So can this word be /w/-/w/-wolf or /d/-/d/-dog?" Jean asked. "No," the two replied, looking somewhat desperately at the picture for additional cues. Jean provided vocabulary support, "Remember, we call this animal a 'fox.' Does that fit with your first sound? They nodded and Jean asked them to read the sentence again. Tomorrow, she predicted, when they read this text again, they would use the /f/ sound to prod the correct word out of memory.

Word-recognition prompts for breaking the code

Although Jean was encouraged by the progress Dwayne, Carla, Lateisha, and Cody were making, she knew these first graders had

Figure 5
Phases of reading development and their characteristics

Learning about print: Phase 1
- Child understands that print carries meaning.
- Child is developing knowledge of print conventions (e.g., directionality, concept of word).
- Child is developing knowledge of letter names and sounds.
- Child is developing basic phonological awareness (e.g., rhyming, syllable awareness).
- Child primarily uses memory, pictures, context, and selected letters to read unfamiliar words.
- Child has oral reading errors likely to be semantically appropriate but orthographically divergent.
- Child is developing use of beginning sounds as a decoding strategy for unfamiliar words.
- Child uses text and prior knowledge to construct meaning.*
- Child is developing knowledge about different types of text.*
- Child has increasing motivation to read.*

Breaking the code: Phase 2
- Child understands the alphabetic principle.
- Child attends to beginning, ending, and medial sounds in words.
- Child is developing more advanced phonological awareness (e.g., blending, segmentation).
- Child has increasing reliance on letter sounds to read unfamiliar words (e.g., blending, chunking).
- Child may read aloud in a halting manner.
- Child has oral reading errors likely to be phonologically similar, but semantically inappropriate.
- Child is developing knowledge of simple spelling patterns (e.g., blends, digraphs, simple rime units).
- Child is developing automaticity as evidenced in sight word corpus (e.g., the, is, you).
- Child is establishing coordination of decoding and comprehension processes.*

Increasing fluency: Phase 3
- Child is developing knowledge of more complex spelling patterns (e.g., complex rime units, suffixes).
- Child has increasing automaticity as evidenced by sight word corpus (e.g., anytime, through).
- Child is developing more advanced phonological awareness (e.g., segmentation, deletion).
- Child increasingly decodes by analogy (i.e., vowel patterns and chunks) to read unfamiliar words.
- Child has improving oral reading accuracy, rate, and expression.
- Child has oral reading errors often close enough phonologically to trigger correct word pronunciation and meaning.

Note. *Continues throughout development. Phases of development are not necessarily discrete; overlap of characteristics may occur.

started considerably behind many of their peers. Jean was aware that these students were engaged in a race against time. Her goal was to get them reading on grade level by the end of the year, but she knew the four children had to cover a large amount of developmental ground. So, as soon as they were comfortable finger pointing in easy predictable texts and using "first sound" to identify words, Jean knew it was time to scaffold them into the next phase of reading development: breaking the code.

Breaking the code refers to the insight that sounds map to letters (Beck & Juel, 1995; Gough & Hillinger, 1980) and, more important, to a beginning reader's ability to read across an entire unfamiliar word and map quickly enough to trigger a pronunciation. Initially, beginners employ this strategy with limited success—a phase in reading development that Ehri (1998) described as "partial alphabetic." For example, partial alphabetic readers may know all four of the individual letter sounds in the word *glass* and may know that they need to use that information, but they may not be able to blend those connections quickly enough to generate a pronunciation. Or, they may process beginning and ending letter sounds smoothly (e.g., /g/ and /s/) but struggle with medial sounds (e.g., /l/ and /a/), thus generating an error such as "guess" or "gas" (Ehri & Wilce, 1987a). It is important to note

Figure 6
Word-recognition prompts organized by developmental phases

Sample word-recognition prompts appropriate across development
Wait for self-correction. If none is forthcoming, say, "Something tricked you; try that again...." Provide a target with your pencil point and give student a "running start."

Sample word-recognition prompts for Phase 1: Learning about print
Target first letter with pencil point and ask, "Sound?"

Try "first sound" prompt, then cue the picture if it is helpful.

Sample word-recognition prompts for Phase 2: Breaking the code
If the word is phonetically regular, target successive letters with pencil point while student blends. If necessary, remind student to "say it fast," "bulldoze it," or "keep your motor running."

If the word is orthographically difficult, or phonetically irregular, use the "first sound" prompt and then provide the word.

If student produces a "nonsense error," say, "Does that make sense?" and, if appropriate, suggest "Try changing the vowel to the short (long) sound."

Sample word-recognition prompts for Phase 3: Increasing fluency
Do you see a pattern (or chunk) you know?

Cover up part of the word so you can see the pattern (chunk).

If student pauses between onset and rime (e.g., /br/.../ick/) say, "Put it together."

If the word is orthographically difficult, or phonetically irregular, use the "first sound" prompt and then provide the word.

that these oral-reading errors bear more orthographic and phonological resemblance to the actual words in the text and are less semantically appropriate than errors readers produce when learning about print (e.g., reading "glass" as "cup"). While this qualitative change in a beginner's approach to unfamiliar words sometimes has been characterized as problematic (Goodman & Goodman, 1977; Smith, 1971), in reality it is an indication of developmental progress. What Chall (1979, 1983) described as being "glued to print" is evidence of a beginner's awareness that letter-sound sequences are the key to breaking the code. The labor involved in using this knowledge sometimes results in the production of nonsense errors as the novice reader tries out one or more pronunciations while looking for the one that makes sense.

Jean knew that blending sounds across a word quickly enough to generate a pronunciation was another developmental benchmark. By mid-December, she knew that Lateisha, Cody, Carla, and Dwayne were within reach of her goal. Concept of word was well in place. All four students had developed a strong command of consonant letters and sounds, and they had some familiarity with short vowels. With this foundation, the four beginners were ready to move on.

To support their transition, Jean adjusted her textual, word-study, and word-prompt scaffolding. During guided reading, she shifted from easy, highly predictable texts to more challenging, but still controlled, decodable and transitional texts (Brown, 1999/2000). She introduced a sequence of word study that focused on short vowels (Bear et al., 2000; Morris, 1999a). When the four beginners struggled with short, phonetically regular words, Jean changed her word-recognition prompts to be consistent with the breaking the code phase of reading development (see Figure 6).

During guided reading of new books, Jean began to model the use of blending to identify short-vowel words. To minimize the demand on working memory that slow blending can cause, Jean often reminded herself out loud to "Say it fast," "Bulldoze the sounds," or to "Keep my motor running." For example, when reading *My Hamster, Van* (Beem, 1996) aloud, Jean stopped just before the word *run* in "He can run up my arm," (p. 14) and said, "I don't know this word, so I'm going to bulldoze it fast: /r/-/u/-/n/...run.

Now, let's go back and see if that makes sense." From there, Jean reread the sentence smoothly; commented, "Yes, that makes sense!"; and asked the four students to echo her reading.

As often happens, some students proved more proficient at this new strategy than others. When Jean listened to Cody cope with unfamiliar words, he often paused so long between sounds that by the end of the word, he had forgotten the first sound. In such cases, Cody usually produced an error that relied on the only sounds he could remember clearly—the last ones (e.g., blending /s/.../i/.../p/ and coming up with "pit"). To help Cody hang on to his "inner speech" in working memory (Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989), Jean frequently modeled how to "keep your motor running." She moved her pencil quickly under the letters, maintaining each sound until she pronounced the next one (e.g., /sss/iii/p/...sip). Before they started reading, Jean frequently asked Cody, "What do good readers do when they sound out?" to which he replied, "Bulldoze it fast!" His attempts to apply this prompt with Jean and on his own resulted in increased speed and fewer errors.

Breaking the code is a challenging phase of reading development for teachers because students' initial attempts at blending often are clumsy and slow. In comparison to the fluency students can display with simple, predictable books earlier in their reading development, beginners breaking the code sometimes sound as if they have regressed. However, the ability to move across whole words independently—even though they may be composed of only three letters—cannot be underestimated. As beginners blend simple words over and over, something important happens—the individual letter-sound connections (e.g., b = /b/, i = /i/, g = /g/) start to bond, or amalgamate, into larger units in memory (Ehri, 1998). At first, when Carla encountered the word *big*, she had to blend it letter-by-letter (i.e., /b/-/i/-/g/). However, after numerous successes with this and other similarly spelled words, one day Carla looked at "big" and said, "/b/-/ig/...big." Amalgamation had begun. Practice blending had helped Carla enter what Ehri (1998) called the "full alphabetic phase," when beginning readers can successfully attend to medial, as well as beginning and ending, connections in words. Some weeks later, Carla looked at the same word in a new text, hesitated just a moment and said, "big." When this happened, Jean knew that the visual representation of the word *big* had bonded with its phonological representation in Carla's memory so thoroughly that it was becoming a sight word. That is, simply looking at *big* triggered its pronunciation and meaning—without blending (Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989).

A beginning reader who can blend brings an important new skill to the word-recognition task. Consider the sentence "My shadow can be a flag or a shark" from the book *My Shadow* (Mitchell, 1996, p. 14). The phrase "My shadow..." is a predictable refrain on every page, but the words following that refrain vary. If Carla does not recognize the word *flag* on sight but can blend rapidly enough to trigger the correct word, she can reduce her use of less reliable strategies such as picture cues (not always helpful), context (often ambiguous), and memory (not available for an unfamiliar text). In addition, the more Carla successfully matches letters to sounds, the more rapidly words will become established in memory and recognized automatically (Ehri, 1992; McCandless et al., in press; Perfetti, 1992).

Word-recognition prompts for increasing fluency

By late spring, Cody, Lateisha, Dwayne, and Carla had expanded their sight-word corpus significantly and had become more proficient at blending. In gauging their progress, Jean felt the four students had successfully "broken the code." She adjusted her instruction to reflect that progress and to scaffold the four students' transition to the final developmental phase: increasing fluency.

In the increasing fluency phase, novice readers become less "glued to print" and begin to orchestrate the reading process. That is, word recognition, comprehension, rate, and expression begin to operate more smoothly and in conjunction—a phenomenon defined as "fluency" (National Reading Panel, 2000). Fluency is a developmental benchmark because it marks the transition to "real reading." Beginning readers who can read primer and late first-grade-level texts with a reasonable measure of fluency (i.e., 90% or better accuracy, 70% or better comprehension, a rate of no less than 30 words per minute, and satisfactory respect for punctuation;

Morris, 1999b) have attained a critical level of reading independence. This independence—the ability to read a wider variety of texts without direct teacher guidance—puts advanced beginners in a position to benefit from an upward spiral that has important long-term benefits (Share & Stanovich, 1995; Stanovich, 1986). When beginners read extensively with success and enjoyment, it increases the likelihood they will choose to read more. In doing so, they consume even more text, which has direct payoffs in increased fluency and achievement—important cognitive benefits. Increased fluency, in turn, makes reading even more successful and enjoyable and provides increased motivation to read. This reciprocal relationship between cognition and motivation—mediated by fluency—is what fuels the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."

With the end of the school year in sight, and a desire for Dwayne, Lateisha, Cody, and Carla to become more fluent, Jean made a number of important adjustments in her reading instruction. As the students showed proficiency in handling leveled text, Jean gradually increased text difficulty, making sure that all four students continued to do an abundance of rereading. When they finished short-vowel word study, Jean introduced new instructional sequences: vowel patterns (Bear et al., 2000; Morris, 1999a) and chunks (Gaskins, 1998). Vowel patterns focused on the most frequent orthographic patterns for each vowel, for example, those found in l*ap*, s*ack*, b*all*, g*ate*, t*ail*, and m*ay* for the vowel *a*. Chunks focused on frequent rime units in key words, for example, *and*, n*est*, fl*ew*, and j*ump* (Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O'Hara, & Donnelly, 1997). Establishing these patterns in memory provides young readers with an important resource for identifying unfamiliar words: the analogous use of patterns from words they know (Ehri, 1998; Perfetti, 1991, 1992). For example, a reader who knows the word *need* at sight, can use the chunk *-eed* to read *bleed* and can use the vowel pattern *-ee-* to read *peek*.

During guided reading of new books, Jean began, as always, by building background knowledge and foreshadowing potentially troublesome words. With these words, she began to model decoding strategies appropriate for advanced beginners. For example, in previewing *Who Has a Tail?* (Robinson, 1996), Jean noticed an emphasis on the pattern *-ai-*. "See if you can spot the tricky vowel pattern you're going to find in this book," she said, using magnetic letters to make the word *tail* on a metal cookie sheet. Using her hands as a frame, Jean isolated *-ai-* and asked, "What does this vowel pattern say?" When the students responded, /a/, Jean asked why, and she received the answer, "The *i* makes the *a* say its name." Next, Jean exposed the entire word and quickly asked, "Then, what's the word?" and was answered by a unified chorus of "tail!" "So, then what's this? And this? And this?" she asked, rapidly changing the beginning and ending letters to make *rain*, *main*, *pail*, *raise*, and the other *-ai-* words the students were about to encounter.

Commensurate with these adjustments in text and word study, Jean also adjusted her prompts to reflect the four students' progress as readers (see Figure 6). This meant that when they encountered words such as *dream* and *poke*, which she previously might have prompted by asking, "First sound?" and cueing the picture, Jean now prompted by asking, "Do you see a chunk in there?" or "What pattern do you see?" For example, while reading *Who Has a Tail?*, Lateisha stopped just before the last word in the sentence "A mother robin may put her tail over her babies when it rains" (p. 6). Despite having successfully read the word *rain* in isolation during word study, Lateisha couldn't seem to get past the initial sound when she saw the same word in context. So, Jean prompted, "Do you see a pattern or a chunk you know?" When Lateisha continued to struggle, Jean elaborated her prompt, "Cover part of the word so you can see the pattern better," she said. That was the help Lateisha needed, and she was able to continue, having successfully used a word-recognition strategy that only weeks ago was out of her grasp.

What made Jean's prompts in this situation so developmentally appropriate? Simply put, they focused on the cutting edge of Lateisha's reading ability. Jean knew that Lateisha's knowledge about orthography was equal to the word *rain*. Jean also wanted to reinforce Lateisha's emerging ability to decode by analogy—an ability strengthened by looking closely at words' spellings. For these reasons, when Lateisha encountered *rains* and struggled, Jean deliberately chose certain prompts to help her. She did not prompt the use of "first sound with picture cues," nor did she

prompt the first sound and then provide the word for the student. While each of these prompts may have been successful, each would have short-changed an opportunity to reinforce Lateisha's knowledge of an important spelling pattern—an opportunity that was best exploited by looking closely at the word (Beck & Juel, 1995; McCandless et al., in press; Pressley, 1998). It is also important to note that Jean did not opt for a blending prompt because the word's orthography does not lend itself to sound-by-sound blending (/r/-/a/-/i/-/n/ is unlikely to trigger *rain*). Rather, by focusing Lateisha's attention on the *-ai-* pattern, or the *-ain* chunk, Jean hoped to speed amalgamation and automaticity.

General guidelines for word prompts

Although the content of word-recognition prompts must change in response to students' progress as readers, Jean has found a few "tried and true" guidelines that cross all phases.

1. How many words needed prompts in that section? Keeping track of the number of words that require prompts during guided reading can help teachers determine whether students are, indeed, reading at their instructional levels. When students are matched to texts appropriately, they should encounter no more than 10 or so trouble spots in approximately 100 words of running text. If the student encounters more than that ratio, the text is too difficult. When it happens over successive texts, the student likely is working at frustration rather than instructional level. In a similar fashion, when an opportunity for prompts does not present itself over several successive texts, independence may have been reached and slightly more challenging text may be in order.

2. Try three quick prompts and then move on. When a student stumbles on a word, Jean waits for self-correction. If it fails to occur, Jean tries two or three quick prompts in succession, and if none work she simply provides the word to preserve fluency. That is, Jean does not engage in extended discussion about word recognition during guided reading. For example, when Cody struggled with the word *cutting* in the sentence "I was cutting my food into bites," Jean prompted him to "Look for the little word at the front." When this didn't work, she prompted him to "Cover up the ending." When he covered up *-ing* and still struggled with *cutt*, Jean covered *-ting* for him and Cody successfully read "cutting...cutting." "If that last prompt hadn't worked, I would have just given him the word," Jean explained. "Sometimes I catch myself getting into a full-blown phonics lesson right in the middle of a book. I have to tell myself, 'Whoa!' Save that for word study; let's get on with reading. If you go overboard, you can get kids so focused on individual words that they forget what they're reading about."

3. First prompt: "Something tricked you" with a running start. When a beginning reader makes an error and fails to self-correct, Jean waits for the student to finish the sentence or phrase and says "Something tricked you...start here" while placing her pencil point on a phrase or sentence before the unfamiliar word. This nonthreatening "first prompt" affords beginners a chance to find and attend to their own mistakes—an important self-regulatory reading behavior (Morris, 1999a). Giving the student a "running start" before encountering the unfamiliar word again also seems to afford students the facilitative effect of context. If the student repeats the error, Jean's next prompt and her pencil point move directly to the troublesome word itself, offering a more specific prompt such as "Sound?" or "What's the pattern in this word?"

4. Evaluate the word's orthography against the student's abilities: Is it worth the effort? Each time a student encounters an unfamiliar word, Jean makes a quick judgment that measures the word's orthography against the student's abilities. If she decides the word is readable, Jean lets the child work at it and supplies prompts as needed because she believes this brief interruption of the reading process is worth the effort. However, if she decides the word is too difficult, Jean provides the word as soon as the student starts to stumble. She said,

> I know that I could wait all day for a reader breaking the code to try and blend through the word *enough*. All that effort will go for naught, so, if the word is over their heads developmentally, I provide it quickly to preserve fluency and let the reading process go on.

It is important to note that these judgments are not random, nor are they an eclectic use of multiple cues. Rather, they are the result of some rapid yet calculated decision making that takes the word's orthography and the child's level of reading development into account.

Ongoing challenges

Primary-grade teachers face ongoing challenges in supporting students' progress as readers. Their effectiveness at meeting these challenges is enhanced when they match text type and word-study instruction with students' reading development. Word-recognition prompts are no different. When teachers align their prompts for unfamiliar words with students' development, they can reinforce the important messages they give during instruction, thus providing additional scaffolding that can help move beginners to the next level. With this developmental perspective in mind, teachers no longer have to view word-recognition prompts as a random, eclectic list of strategies or a forced choice between a code or a holistic emphasis. Rather, their prompts will change in response to what the reader can do and where the reader needs to go next—guided by the question, "What kind of prompt should I be using with this reader at this point in development?"

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