MICHIGAN READING JOURNAL

Michigan Reading Journal

Volume 33 | Issue 1 Article 4

October 2000

The Trumpet of the Cues

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Geometry never made sense to me until my husband and I measured and sawed in restoring an old Michigan farmhouse. I need the concrete to help me understand.

Dorsey Hammond made an analogy between a trumpet and the cues of reading that I've also found helpful. Hammond, a professor of reading at Oakland University and MRA Board Member, compared the three valves of the trumpet to the three cue systems of meaning, language structure, and visual that proficient readers use in getting the meaning from the message.

If you're on the beach in Key West, Florida, at sundown, you'll hear *Taps* being played. The musician may be pressing down one or two valves at a time, but the overall song is played by using all three valves interactively. Like this trumpet player, a good reader orchestrates all three cue systems.

Think of how a child reads. The "proficient reader functions with an interdependence between the three cueing systems: semantics (context: what makes sense), syntax (structure and grammar: what sounds right) and grapho-phonics (letter/sound relationships: what looks right visually and sounds right phonetically) to make sense". ((Routman, 1991, p. 147)

The analogy between the trumpet keys and cue systems is important, not because both just happen to have three of something, but because both depend on orchestration in order for someone to be proficient. The horn blower who kept his finger on one key would never accelerate out of the school band room and onto the playing field. One reason many children have difficulty learning to read is that their instruction has made them over-attentive to one cueing system, typically the phonic or the visual cue system. One the other end, too much attention to meaning and language doesn't enable readers to use all three cue systems. A balance must be maintained.

Primary teachers all over the country are thrilled to use the natural language texts that were brought across the ocean from down-under. They observe early readers embracing these little books because children can bring 5 to 6 years of experience to a text that is based on a strength - their language. Those highly rewarding little books make use of the syntactic cue system in a way that the basal pre-primer ~~never even touched~~. ~~If you're~~ not familiar with the little books from the Wright Group Storybox, then just think back to Bill Martin's Brown Bear, Brown Bear and its wonderful rhythm, pattern and use of natural language. Teachers observe that many young readers orchestrate all the cue systems while reading these wonderful books. The natural language text allows readers to predict the next word more easily. The illustrations and story sense of each little book call upon the prior experience and meaning that each child can bring to the text.

The two cue systems of language structure and meaning to a story must be in place in order for the third cue system, phonics (or the visual system) to make sense. None of the cue systems can stand alone and elicit comprehension. The key to putting together "Taps" or Brown Bear, is the continual parallel processing of all three valves or cue systems.

A fluent reader is making use of all the cue systems. These systems are most observable at the point of error (E) and the possible self-correction (SC) of that error. The cues used in making the error provide you with some insight into the child's thinking. The cues used when she detects the error and self-corrects it provide another window into her thinking when she searches for more information. The

overall pattern of the cues used and cues neglected at an error indicate what the child is attending to when she reads.

To keep the terminology simple as cues are described using Laura Numerhoff's Jack and Jill, the following notations will be used for the three cue systems:

- **M - Meaning:** The child may have actively searched the illustration or used the whole story sense for this cue system to be used. The error substitution lies in the meaning of the illustration and/or story sense.
- **S - Structure:** If the child has used structure in making the error, the words up to and including the error make sense.
- **V - Visual:** The child has substituted a word that begins with the same sound or in some way looks visually similar.

MEANING CLUES: WHAT MAKES SENSE IN REGARD TO THE ILLUSTRATION AND STORY.

To better understand the role that meaning plays as a cue system, examine the remarkable difference in meaning between a pre-primer story and the favorite "little book", Mrs. Wishy-Washy, from the Wright Group Storybox Collection. It is interesting to note that the author of Mrs. Wishy-Washy, is not a teacher, but a mom.

Joy Cowley began writing her natural language texts when she observed her son having difficulty reading the controlled vocabulary of the school readers in New Zealand. These stories did not resemble the stories she knew her son loved to listen to at home, and so began the movement of "little books" that are taking the place of many pre-primers. She is one parent volunteer who really made a difference.

"Oh, lovely mud," said the cow and she jumped in it.
"Oh, lovely mud," said the pig, and he rolled in it.
"Oh, lovely mud," said the duck and she paddled in it. (1980)

Marie Clay, like many of us who have laughed with a lass as the animals return to the mud after a good scrubbing, observed young readers to be thoroughly engaged with this book. They searched the picture for meaning cues as they read and used the strengths of their language. As a result of this and many other observations, Clay decided that "the text can only teach about things with which the child is interacting." (1991, p. 189) Interaction is most assured when meaning is present.

When teachers use pre-primers based on high frequency word arrangements, they should examine the stories to determine if students can use they meaning cue systems. "One of the beautiful advantages of reading sense is that is provides its own feedback." (Smith, 1978) Not only is meaning absent from some pre-primers, but children cannot bring the wealth of their language to their first formal introduction to "reading". In the chapter on "Storybooks and a Meaning Emphasis" in Becoming Literate, Clay warns us to be aware when "learning the nature of the written code take precedence over meaning... When meaningfulness is seen to be the first priority in a reading program, the message is more important than the words or letters which are collectively only the carriers of meaning." (1991, p. 188) We don't expect young children to speak or write like pre-primers. We'd be concerned if their language resembled pre-primer conversation, yet we continue to introduce them to reading with these contrived texts.

Having said all of the above, it is often hard to single out when a early reader is using meaning cues, unless you actually see her search the illustration when faced with a "tricky word". The use or neglect of this cue system is most evident when errors are analyzed. The child who reads, *"Jack and Jill ran to the well,"* is inventing from the illustration. In this example, the child has used both structure (it sounds right) and meaning (makes sense using the picture), but isn't paying attention to print. One the flip side, other children pay too close attention to print, to the neglect of meaning.

CAN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES: NEGLECT MEANING CUES

							h-i R	*(student sounds out word)*
Child	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Text	Jack	and	Jill	went	up	the	hill,	T (Teacher Told)

The most obvious teaching point from the running record example above is that the child is not using meaning. This student is using the visual cue system to the point that meaning is not being orchestrated with the visual cues. Simply direct the child's eyes to the illustration.

I am working with a first grade neighbor after school. When I observed her reading, I noticed that her hand covered many of the illustration as she read. Many times, if she had lifted her hand and looked at the picture, she would not have struggled with sounding out *t-r-l* and simply lifted her hand off the illustration, searched for something that began with the letter *t* and read *turtle*. How many of us have heard, "That's not really reading. They're just looking at the picture." Somehow the attention to the visual or phonic cue system over the orchestration of all three cues have given rise to the notion that a "real" reader could look at the work *turtle* alone and read it, without the help of a illustration. For that same reason, it is a different task to "read" words from a word list, which are taken out of context of meaning and structure. Word calling might be analogous to the trumpet player who uses one valve. To render *Taps* or to call it reading, there must be an orchestration of all the systems. The visual cues get cross-checked with the meaning and structure when the child searches for the word that will sound right (structure cues), look right (visual cues) and make sense (meaning cues).

> *The shift we need to make lies in understanding the "new emphasis on the role of meaning as a facilitator of reading, not merely a product of it..."* (Marie Clay, 1991, p. 290)

STRUCTURE CUES: READING WHAT "SOUNDS RIGHT"

A child who is making use of syntactic cues when an error is made substitutes a word that makes sense up to that point. The running record might look like this: (for more information about running records, see the assessment chapter.)

					Cues used:			
					E	SC	E	SC
				ran	I		M(S)V	
Child	✓	✓	✓					
Text	Jack	and	Jill	went				

It is very common for early readers, even those who have developed one-to-one matching, to have what is referred to as *language structure override*. Their errors primarily reflect a pattern of circled S's for

structure. The circle of the S within the MSV cue system indicates that the cue used was structural. Reading *Jack and Jill ran* makes sense up to that point, but the reader isn't paying attention to the print.

In the case of the child above who read *ran* for *went*, the child needs to be directed toward using the visual cue system. It is the parallel processing that will enable the child to become a strategic reader. *Ran* for *went* does "sound right", but it must also "look right". The most powerful teaching point to follow-up this running record might range from the general to the more specific question, depending on the child:

- "Reread this sentence, please" (If the word is self-corrected during the rereading, ask the child what he changed and why. If it's not corrected, go through the prompts below.)
- "There's a mistake on this part. Can you find it?"
- "If you are going to write ran, what letter would you write first? Could this word be ran?"

NOTE: If a child has a strong structure override in his reading and the one-to-one matching isn't consistent, priority goes to getting that early strategy of matching established. The above prompts suggested here focus on developing the visual cue system.

HOOKED ON THE VISUAL: ISOLATION OR IN CONTEXT?

First grade teachers generally believe that attention to the visual cue system is important in teaching beginning reading. The great debate is not whether "phonics should be taught, but rather how phonics should be taught meaningfully". (Routman, 1991, p. 147) Andrea Butler compared learning to read using phonics alone to trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle without the benefit of the cover illustration on the box. I have difficulty even with the box close at hand! A puzzle makes sense when it can be placed in the context of sky or ground or puzzle characters. Taken out of context (or taken out of the orchestration of all three cue systems), the phonic skill could befuddle a child the way Shel Silverstein's (1981, p. 21) lost puzzle piece raised different possibilities as to its place in the whole picture.

Picture Puzzle Piece

One picture puzzle piece
Lyin' on the sidewalk,
One picture puzzle piece
Soakin' in the rain.
It might be a button of blue
On the coat of a women
Who lived in a shoe...

The sound of *a* as in *apple* makes the best sense when it can be placed within the whole picture of the word that is within the context of a story. The question is not if, but how. If phonics is being taught in isolation, the puzzle box has been put away. A lot of time is wasted being spent looking for pieces that have no context.

When a teacher adopts the point of view that the visual cue system is one to be orchestrated, he begins to teacher phonics strategically. One prompt that Routman and Clay both use with early readers who are faced with a tricky word is: "Get your mouth ready". I have found that it is helpful to bring out a small mirror and have a child look at how his mouth looks when he's getting ready to say a word that

begins with *w* or *th*. I encourage all teachers to review Routman's ideas on "Phonics in Perspective" in Invitations (1991, p. 147). The balance of phonics in the overall orchestration of cues is also addressed in the research conducted by Gay Su Pinnell (1993) of early interventions of first-graders having difficulties learning to read.

APPLE, ELEPHANT, IGLOO, OCTOPUS, UMBRELLA: HOW DO THESE FIT TOGETHER?

If this were a question on the verbal analogy section of the SAT's, only a primary teacher would recognize them as key words for teaching of short vowels. These were probably selected because commercial program printed these pictures on cards and publisher need the picture of something concrete for a workbook page. It's a lot easier to print an igloo than to use the high-frequency work *in* the short vowel *i* . I have cut out many an igloo for phonic games, not really considering that igloos are not within the experience of my audience. In contrast, every time they walk in through the doors of our large grocery stores they are faced with *in*. Either those key words listed above are irrelevant or the consonant sound following the vowel is so dominant that what the child really hears when he say *elephant* slowly is an *l*. What are we really teaching in using key words?

Students do benefit from a key word that can anchor them in their reading and writing. However, we get more mileage out of these linking words if they are words that students will see a lot in books, as whole words or chunks of words, everyday reading and writing. Not too many children use *igloo* and *octopus* in their everyday reading and writing. They do see and use *in* and *on*. Much to the dismay of her health-food-eating father, my oldest daughter's first two-word sentence was "Donald's eat" as we passed the golden arches. I have written parent letters asking them to point out the high-frequency words their children pass each day, such as *in*, *out*, *on*, and *off* in hopes they will be read as easily as McDonald's, K-Mart, Meijers, Pizza Hut. I do use the key word EXIT for the short *e* sound. They read it around the school and can better associate that sound with the letter *e*.

There should be nothing more troubling for you than to listen to a child read as though the strategy on every word were to sound it out. Fluency is lost. Most often, the same child is not using all three cue systems. This probably due to over-instruction on the visual, with an emphasis on individual sounds and letter. When visual attention to print is called for, "getting your mouth ready" is a good prompt for the initial letter. From that point on, if a tricky word that cannot be solved through a reread for structure cues or a look at a picture for meaning, the students should be looking for the "chunks" that they may recognize.

Students can learn to "go for the chunk" with two types of teacher prompts:

1. **"Do you see a little word you know in that tricky word?"**
   If the tricky word was *stand*, the student could frame *and*, read it, and extend it to *stand*. Chunking or seeing "little words" in bigger words is another reason to use *in* instead of *igloo*. This strategy of chunking has been documented for quite a while. Eleanor Gibson's work (1965) concluded that beginning readers used chunks or clusters of letter or sounds. Clay reports continued research on Gibson's findings supporting that "syllabic attack was the most common (word analysis behavior), even at a young age". (1991, p. 308). While good readers may see chunks, at-risk students may need to have them pointed out. This support has also been followed by the research review from Goswami & Bryant (1991).

2. **"Do you know a word that looks like this tricky word?"**
   Many children struggle over a word such as *had* when they can write *Dad* and have done so for years. They may need help making the link from what they know to what they don't know and this is addressed further in the section on *Early Strategies*. If the prompt for the word that looks like *had* is too general, become more specific. You need to model this linking strategy to obtain visual information. "You know how to read and write *Dad*. This tricky word looks and sounds like *Dad*. Goswami's work supports this connection between rhyming and linking.

Our first casual link (about learning to read) begins with events that take place some time before children begin to learn to read. They hear, and produce, rhyme. They become adept at recognizing when words have common rhymes. So they form categories of words and when they begin to read they soon recognize that words in the same categories often have spelling patterns in common and that this spelling sequence represents the common sound. As soon as they realize this, they can make inferences about new words, and they do. (1991, p. 147)

Never before has the relationship between rhyming and learning to read become so critically linked. It would be worthwhile for all kindergarten teachers to address how they set the stage for this strategy. I would not have been so casual about rhyming. I would be more deliberate about introducing this link and individualizing it.

It took a great deal of time for my first grader, Pat, to see the relationship of his name to *sat*, *cat* and *that*. For a child who has been in school two years and remains at-risk in first grade, the deliberate connection of this link could have been made for him in very developmentally appropriate ways in kindergarten. The "Reading Teacher" articles referred to in the chapter on Phonemic Awareness details many such activities.

I needed Routman to remind me that" phonics proficiency by itself cannot elicit comprehension of text. While phonics is integral to the reading process. It is subordinate to semantics and syntax". (1991, p. 147) I never orchestrated my focus on the visual cue system with structure and meaning until I learned about cross-checking. Good readers cross-check their cue sources. The teacher who begins to understand the parallel processing of these cues will be a much more powerful teacher of reading.

GOOD READERS LEARN TO READ BY READING: SIGNS OF A SELF-EXTENDING SYSTEM.

Prior to reading Marie Clay, my only experience with anything self-extending was ladders. My husband, a very accomplished man, cannot climb past the tenth rung. We were wiring our own home and I was on the ladder wiring the outside terrace light with him leaning out the second floor bedroom window telling me to cross the black to the red wire. I feel much safer learning about the self-extending systems of children as they become readers.

In understanding why "good readers seem to get better while the poor readers fall further behind as they accumulate years in school," Marie Clay credits the research of Oakland University reading professor, Keith Stanovich, (1986) for steering discussion away from explaining the discrepancy by blaming the learner to examining what the good readers are doing that propels them forward to take on more difficult text. "Something about the ways in which they read creates a forward thrust, and perhaps this is something the poor readers have not managed to learn." (1991, p. 4) Marie Clay has identified some of the characteristics of these good readers and has drawn them together in what she has called "the self-extending system".

1. **Self-monitoring**

Good readers continually self-monitor their reading. If they read something that doesn't sound right, look right, or make sense, they search for more information. Self-monitoring occurs because the reader perceives a mismatch of reading cues, one-to-one matching, or using anchor words to locate himself in the text. "Self-monitoring and self-correcting provide important behavioral signals of inner control in oral reading. The teacher must encourage the child to monitor his own reading and encourage self-management." (Clay, 1991, p. 252) Self-monitoring can make use of the following early strategies:

A. One-to-one matching

Teachers who are discouraged by children who invent text as they read, take heart! "Although it can lead to error, inventing is one behavior one can do something with, unlike stalling and make no response...but a child who continue to regard reading time as an invitation to construct creatively his own story has completely missed the point - that reading is a matter of extracting, relating and processing cues to decode a particular message." (Clay, 1991, p. 169) I tell children who invent to save that creativity for writing. Nathan was such a child. While his finger tried to match every word, he often read a multi-syllable word over the next four words and lost his one-to-one matching, but he kept reading, quite happily. My prompts to steer him back to the one-to-one matching were usually something like, "Does that match?" We would both read it back together. We framed multi-syllable words with our fingers to note the space before and after them, clapped them and talked about them as "two-touch" or "three-touch" words. I remember the day of my wedding, the births of my daughters, and now, the day Nathan stopped at the period. He was ready to go on inventing. You could see him bite his tongue. He looked at me the same way Darcy, my oldest daughter, stopped and looked at me when she made her first basket, while the other players had moved down the court. He knew he had made it. I let him know that I knew he had started to self-monitor. He was starting to take control of his own reading. At this point his finger signaled the error. After the finger prompt is dropped, his eyes will do the same for him.

B. Using anchor words

It was noted in the *Early Strategies* section that learning high-frequency words is a skill. Using those words to serve an anchors to self-monitor is what elevates that to the strategy level. When an early reader has learned a few high-frequency words such as *the*, *I*, *a*, and *and*, these can serve as guideposts to orient the child to the uncertainty of the text. "The complex, integrated sequences of behaviors in reading are controlled by particular features in the text that are recognized. At first, amid varying degrees of uncertainty, the child locates island of certainty." (Clay, 1991, p. 172) When a child's finger is under the word *the*, she should be reading *the*. Signs of self-monitoring through the use of these islands of certainty are evident when a child reads something other than *the* and stops.

C. Cross-checking and searching

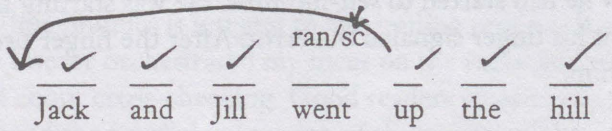
Cross-checking of cues is closely related to self-monitoring in that it follows the awareness that searching is needed to confirm the response. Cross-checking will not occur if a child does not monitor his own reading. The key to understanding the cue system lays in the orchestration of all three cues. The teacher prompts for one cue encourage cross-checking of another. "What you've said sounds right. Does this word look like _____?" These prompts encourage the

independence to search for the orchestration of all cues. The students knows that his response based on visual information can be confirmed through the meaning and structure. Cross-checking specifically refers to the reader's use of orchestrating the three cue systems.

Cross-checking involves checking one kind of cue against another. The child who reads *Jack and Jill ran* knows it sounds right, but self-monitors by cross-checking this structure with the visual. Sometimes a student will stop, know something is not right, but not be able to self-correct. A teacher prompt at this time might range from the general, "Why did you stop?" to the specific, "If this word was *ran*, what letter would you expect to see at the beginning?" By focusing the child's attention on the *w* for *went*, you are highlighting the discrepancy that he noticed in self-monitoring.

2. **Self-correcting: An error is not an error if it can be fixed.**
I had never hear of the term "self-correcting" until a few years ago and I now notice it in my own oral reading and while listening to my children read. Even Marie Clay admits how humbled she was to observe how good progress self-corrects as they learn to read. In her research, Marie Clay studied the behaviors of good readers to determine what they did to make themselves even better readers. These strategies are in turn developed with readers who are at risk. A first grader who is at risk tends not to self-correct. If we know that self-correction is one strategy that develops the inner control to become an independent strategic reader, then it becomes clear how these children learn to read by reading. "The self-correction process is also progressive an cumulative because at the mismatch the child initiates a search for missing information and finds or attends to features previously ignored." (Clay, 1991, p. 337)

A running record of the students who read *ran* for *went*, but searched, reread and self-corrected would look like the following:



It is possible for a child to read at a 100% accuracy level with a self-correction rate of 1:1. For every error, she made a self-correction. Until our ears become accustomed to hearing self-corrections, the visual example provided by the running record helps us not only count the self-corrections, but to analyze them for the cues that were neglected when the error was initially made and used when the error was detected and corrected. **An at-risk reader will accelerate when the teacher can determine the pattern of cues neglected and orchestrate them with the other cue systems.**

My husband coaches young soccer players. His praise of their approximations is very specific. They know why they are good, whether it's how they stop the ball, run and kick, or pass to each other. Early readers deserve the same specific feedback for why are becoming good readers. They are paying attention to what looks right, sounds right, and makes sense. They search and cross-check those cue systems. Most importantly, they try to self-correct. These readers, while having never read Frank Smith's 1978 landmark book, Understanding Reading, know that "one of the most beautiful advantages of reading sense is that it provides its own feedback".

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