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ABSTRACT

Repetitions in children's oral reading are typically thought of as disruptive, signalling the kind of careless reading symptomatic of random eye movement or inattention to context. This perspective, however, runs contrary to clinical experiences, which have revealed that many repetitions are deliberate and benefit the reader by serving at least one of three distinct purposes. The first is to aid recognition of difficult words. When word difficulties arise, the reader is likely to "back up" to an earlier portion of the sentence in an attempt to trigger recognition or decoding of an unfamiliar word. The second purpose is to confirm or test the suitability of word choices. Once the reader has deciphered a new word, he or she may repeat the surrounding phrase, including the new word choice, to test its suitability for that particular portion of the context. If the word proves unsuitable, it is likely to be abandoned and additional attempts made. Such repetitions may amplify the readers' confirmation, in which case the reader may simply repeat with new found confidence and eagerness in order to regain control of oral delivery. The third purpose for repetitions is to regain fluency. In the absence of specific word difficulties, readers may back up and reread an entire word group or phrase, adjusting vocal pitch and stress, in an attempt to achieve fluency when the rhythm and intonation of the oral delivery have forced a given word to sound "out of sync" with the natural word group. (HTH)

Repetition as a Factor in Oral Reading Acquisition

by

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When children read aloud and deviate from the printed word--more specifically when they substitute, omit or insert words--teachers tend to be astute listeners. When such deviations occur, teachers are likely to engage in an analytical assessment of errors, distinguishing among those deviations from print that signal good reading strategies from those that signal poor or inefficient reading habits. Applications of miscue analysis for informal classroom use have made the practice of interpreting oral reading deviations systematic and insightful. When children repeat, however, analytical assessment is far less certain.

While repetitions seldom go unnoticed, their interpretation is the least understood of all the "deviations" characteristic of children's oral reading. Without adequate explanation to think otherwise, repetitions are typically thought of as disruptive, signalling the kind of careless reading symptomatic of random eye movement or inattention to context. Commercial informal reading inventories perpetuate the latter interpretation of repetitions. Even those informal reading inventories that include adaptations of error analyses in their record keeping procedures persist in classifying repetitions homogenously, providing little explanation outside of instructions to count them as errors in oral passage reading. The Reading Miscue Inventory's (1972) examination of repetitions is at best, limited. Repetitions of given misread words are analysed only as they reoccur at later times in the reading of the text so that habituated word confusions can be identified and that changes in word errors made early in text can be studied as the context evolves. The more immediate repetitions that occur as the reader struggles with each line of print are not defined per se.

This perspective is unfortunate in that it runs contrary to clinical experi-

ence with repetitions in oral reading. The discussion that follows is intended to propose several explanations of repetitions as legitimate indicators of well-developing proficiency and to encourage their inclusion in analytical assessment. The basis of the argument is derived from the oral reading analyses of several hundred school-aged readers, representing a considerable range of ability, who have come to the University of South Carolina's College of Education Reading Clinic over the last few years. Oral reading analyses is standard procedure in initial diagnosis and periodic assessment of on-going progress, from which the frequency of repetitions and the existing conditions surrounding their occurrence have been well documented. From these analyses, repetitions have emerged as a unique set of oral reading characteristics with strength in predictability to invite special consideration.

Few repetitions appear to be random and careless departures from print. Many are deliberate in use and benefit the reader by serving at least one of three distinct purposes: 1) to aid the recognition of difficult words; 2) to confirm a word discovery or to test the suitability of a word choice; and 3) to maintain fluency.

Repetitions that aid word recognition.

The most frequent kind of repetition accompanies an encounter with a difficult word. When word difficulties arise the reader is likely to "back up" to an earlier portion of the sentence, repeating a preceding word or phrase in an attempt to trigger a correct response. Some readers return to the beginning of the sentence, repeating it with increased momentum as if to force the discovery of the unknown word. These readers are making deliberate use of the flow of context analogous to a running start that launches an otherwise difficult feat. They repeat to retrieve lost momentum, enabling them in turn to maximize the predictability of the language of the text. So provoked, the correct word or a reasonable substitution often slips out to the delight of

the reader.

Repetitions such as these are easy to identify. Two examples will demonstrate.

A fifth grade child reading a passage about a bicyclist competing in the Olympic Championship races experiences word difficulty in the following context:

> At that moment a horrifying thing happened as she was bumped by another racer at forty miles an hour. Sheila's bicycle crashed, and she skidded to the surface of the track... (taken from B. Woods and A. Moe, Analytical Reading Inventory, Form A, Charles Merrill Publishing Co., 1980, p. 49).

The child experienced difficulty with the word surface. Following a hesitation (/) an attempt was made to decode. The word as transcribed below sur-fy. The child returned to the phrase immediately preceding, repeating it with increased momentum (skidded to the) launching an automatic response, in this case, the correct word (©). (The child's reading attempts are numbered to indicate sequence).

...skidded to the / surface of the track.
3 1. 2 sur-fy 4. surface ©

A second grade child met with word difficulty in the following context about a dragon who spent his time searching for a wagon of his own.

> Every night before Hector, the dragon, went to sleep he wished for a red wagon. Every morning he looked behind each rock and tree, but he never found a thing... (taken from Far and Away, American Book Company, p. 151).

The child read fluently up to the word each. (The name Hector was provided by the teacher). Encountering this word, the child hesitated briefly, returned

immediately to the beginning of the sentence repeating it quietly to himself and readily substituted a comparable word i.e., every for each.

2. Every morning he looked behind 1. / 3. every each rock and tree, but...

In the latter example the child's failure to arrive at the correct word is considerably less disappointing in light of the quality of the substitution. Repetitions that confirm or test the suitability of word choices.

Repetitions are also associated with word discoveries. When a discovery is thought to be made the reader may repeat the surrounding phrase, including the new word choice to test its suitability for that particular portion of the context. If the word proves unsuitable, it is likely to be abandoned and additional attempts made.

When actual discoveries occur however, repetitions may amplify the reader's confirmation of the newly discovered word. In this event the reader may simply repeat the word or its immediate context with new found confidence and eagerness to regain control of his or her oral delivery.

The most dramatic demonstration of the latter use of repetition is evident when word discoveries are made after the reader has left behind a troublesome word and continues to read on in the text, often a good deal beyond the point of word difficulty. The desire to confirm a word discovery is apparently strong enough in many developing readers that they are compelled to return to the phrase or to the beginning of the sentence in which the difficulty first arose, rereading the entire context through to the place at which they were when the discovery was made.

A third grade child was reading about two young children who set out to explore a cave they had been warned was too dangerous for them to enter. Following a brief hesitation and some initial sounding the child read cage for cave. As the story continued however, additional clues from the context diminished the

likelihood of cave as a valid word choice, e.g., it "grew darker and colder as they walked," the "rocky walls," etc.

Nearly a paragraph beyond the substitution, the child made the discovery, scanned the preceding paragraph to locate the original sentence in which the error had been committed and preceded to quickly reread the entire context up to the point where he had left off, before continuing on with the remaining portion of the text. In this particular instance an incidental anedote is worth relating. When the child finished the passage he was asked why he decided to read the beginning paragraph again when he realized the word was cave, instead of reading on. His response lends testimony to the deliberate use of repetitions to "make everything sound right, all together."

Repetitions that attempt to regain fluency.

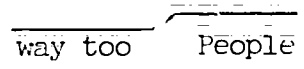
Many readers, particularly intermediate school children, read within a limited range of vocal play. If their understanding of the intent of the passage is good however, they will maintain the more subtle characteristics of word groupings, and variations in stress and pitch. In otherwise expressionless reading that is still fluent, words are not spoken one by one, but in the phrasing and stress patterns characteristic of quiet speech.

In the absence of specific word difficulties, readers may back up to reread the entire word group or phrase in an attempt to achieve fluency when the rhythm and intonation of the delivery have forced a given word to be "out of sync" with the natural word group. A seventh grader demonstrates this. He was reading aloud a passage which concluded one of its arguments by stating that many others shared the same feelings as had been presented. The sentence read:

> This issue is not reserved for the rich alone.
> There are others who feel this way too. People
> from...

When the student came to the word too he had a slight drop in pitch and continued on to the first word of the next sentence people, without pasuing. An

unnatural word group was thus generated.

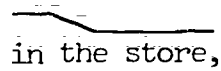


Noting his "error" the student returned to way, repeating his initial attempt, this time giving way and too equal stress, raising his pitch somewhat to accommodate the correct delivery of too and pausing to denote a completed thought before advancing to the next sentence. In this case word difficulty did not provoke the repetition -- loss of fluency did.

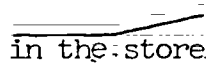
Another reader repeats as a result of inappropriately placed stress within an otherwise natural word group.

In the sentence "The man was in the store when the fire alarm sounded", a fifth grader misplaces stress within the word group in the store.

The student read



reversing the pitch and stress levels between in and store. Dissatisfied with his delivery the student returned to in and repeated



As in the prior example, word difficulty was not the provocation for repetition; it was instead a matter of adjusting pitch and stress to regain fluency.

Summary

At their onset, repetitions may appear to disrupt the oral delivery; their effect, nevertheless, is anything but disruptive. They are strategies self-imposed by the developing reader intent on getting meaning from print. Repetitions such as those described are deliberate and systematic efforts on the part of the reader to take hold of and hold on to context.

A viable addition to analytical assessment, the acknowledgment of repetitions promises new insight into the acquisition process as it evolves.