Shortening the tail:

A critical look at the prompts New Zealand Teachers use in teaching reading

Margaret Coogan

Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour, based at Pukekohe Intermediate

ABSTRACT

Research suggests New Zealand has the biggest gap between its highest and lowest achievers, and this is known as the "long tail". The debate over whole language and phonics approaches to reading is unfinished, but must now focus on where the point of difference lies. While reading involves a range of skills, teachers need to model the prompts that relate to word level knowledge as a primary strategy and context cues as a secondary strategy. This involves attention to the rightful place of phonics. I will draw from research and my anecdotal evidence as a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB). I aim to question the prompts typically heard in classrooms and stress the need for sequential teaching, especially for beginning readers. Attention to "context" over the "word" is reflected not only in learning but in ongoing behaviour difficulties.

KEYWORDS:
Phonics, whole language, literacy, reading.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of the long tail in educational achievement levels of New Zealand children is a matter of concern for both teachers and policy writers alike. That is the picture which emerged from the findings of three international studies (PIRLS, 2001; Innocenti Report Card, 2002; Pisa, 2000, cited by the Maxim Institute, 2003) that compared achievement levels in schools internationally. All three indicate that New Zealand has the biggest gap between its highest and poorest performance levels in reading, science and maths. This article explores achievement in literacy by specifically questioning the strategies young readers are taught in our primary schools. It draws on relevant literature, research involving strategies used by a struggling reader and anecdotal information I have gathered in contact with classroom practice on a daily basis. It questions the current plethora of initiatives offered to schools and a preoccupation with "big picture" approaches to problem solving and suggests that the answers may lie in looking more closely at effective teaching. While the Ministry of Education's aim is to raise achievement and reduce disparity across the whole education system on a sustainable basis to ensure that New Zealand maintains its high international reputation and achievement rankings (Fancy, 2004), James Chapman described our performance in reading as 'disastrous' in *The Dominion Post*, 9 April 2003 (cited by the Maxim Institute, 2003). If we celebrate the achievements of our top students (and we do), how do we respond to the results of those who fail? Given that both

groups and those in between are educated in the same system, how do we answer the question Why? What's going on?

My role as an RTLB included the running of a parent tutor reading programme over a number of years – for Teacher Aides as well as parents – based on the video 'Pause Prompt Praise'. The programme was designed to assist tutors help young readers become independent readers, and promoted the use of four strategies.

1. Using meaning or context.

2. Prior knowledge or background meaning.

3. Knowledge of letter names and sounds.

4. Knowledge of everyday language.

It teaches tutors to pause and allow beginning readers time to attempt unknown words, then to prompt using the above strategies and to praise the use of these strategies, as well as correct reading. Participants in the programme invariably commented on their need to pause rather than rush in to prompt as their major learning need. But what of the prompts and the praise? My stance as the presenter of the programme was about to be challenged.

I had enrolled in a post-graduate reading paper through Massey University in the 1990s, when there was a continuation of the debate about the relative merits of the whole language versus phonics approaches to the teaching of reading. Briefly, whole language had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, asserting that children learn to read through exposure to books in a literature-rich environment. It was a reaction to the code emphasis, or phonics approach, which taught letter-sound correspondence rules to "sound out" words, reading isolated words and was often dismissed as drill and not really reading. The handbook for the 'Ready to Read' series emphasised the teaching of reading in context over the decoding of words in isolation (Awatere-Huata, 2002). Since the 1990s, few educators disputed the need for both aspects in any approach to the teaching of reading. Teachers say they've always taught phonics, and that a literacy-rich environment is important. What has not been fully discussed is the point at which these two divergent approaches to the teaching of reading meet on a continuum, and just what the significant point of difference between them is. Awatere-Huata (2002) described the debate as "raging, despite the assertion that it is 'tired' and has served its' purpose," (p.30) and suggests that the problem lies

in failure to reach agreement about definition of terms such as whole language. Deighton-O'Flynn (2003) unashamedly described her phonics-based programme as a way of teaching children to read by " 'sounding out' (decoding) unfamiliar words [as opposed to] other early reading series which rely more on memory and sight-recognition of whole words [and] which do not enable children to read unfamiliar words" (p. 3).

Reading is about cracking the written code. It's about getting meaning from print and about gaining insights into the relationship between the alphabetic characters (graphemes) and the units of sound (phonemes) they represent. In discussing the stages of normal reading development, Spear-Swerling and Sternberg (1996) use the metaphor of a road map to describe the journey normal readers embark on.

First stage – Visual Cue Word Recognition

These readers are non-alphabetic and they rely heavily on visual cues such as the two "eyes" with glasses on in the word look. They don't yet understand that it's the letters that carry the meaning. Look and say – a whole word approach.

Second stage – Phonetic Cue Word Recognition

These readers are developing alphabetic insight. At this stage the reader may recognise the word boat, but easily confuse it with boot or beat, since the ability to decode is based on recognition of the first and last letters of the word and its general shape. In the sentence "The boy sailed his toy b—t", the child is likely to choose boat because it fits in this context.

The Third Stage – Controlled Word Recognition

These readers have accurate but non-automatic word recognition. They begin to recognise groups of letters, but their lack of fluency impairs comprehension.

Fourth stage – Automatic Word Recognition

These readers are able to read more fluently and have good strategies which they use to process more and more "print-miles" of reading.

Fifth stage – Strategic Reading

These readers use a range of strategies to successfully manage their own reading.

Using the road map metaphor, Spear-Swerling and Sternberg (1996) point out that once off-track at any point along the way, poor readers see other sights and these are mostly negative. Of particular significance are the readers who go off-track at an early stage. We are familiar with the low self-image which develops and the attribution of failure to being "dumb" when previously they may have tried harder, the learned helplessness, and the 'Matthew Effect' (Stanovich, 1986). Those who wander off-track at the second stage are easily missed. They do understand basic concepts about print and may even appear to be "on track". But they employ the comparatively lower level strategies, such as initial letter or picture cues – lower level because they are not skills that can stand alone out of that particular reading context.

How do the strategies used by these poor readers differ from the strategies used by their more successful peers?

Tunmer and Chapman (1996) asked a group of children, "What do you do when you come to a word you don't know?" The answers were revelatory and consistent. When faced with a word they didn't know, good readers used strategies based on word level knowledge as their primary strategy. That is, they looked at the word and made an attempt based on what they already knew in order to decode it. In contrast, poor readers consistently used context clues such as background meaning, picture and what the word looked like – aptly described as "contextual guessing." It was not that the good readers did not use these contextual cues, but they used them as secondary strategies, as a way of backing up their initial attempts.

THE CURRENT STUDY

My own research supports these findings. Using a case study of a 12-year-old-boy with the reading age of a 7-year-old, the project involved the use of two tape recorders. The student read on to tape No 1. We stopped the tape, rewound it and turned on tape No 2. He listened to his own reading, stopping to self-correct at his own pace. Meanwhile Tape No 2 was recording his responses (and mine!) The tape recordings provided not only a permanent record of my subject's reading attempts but his metacognitive processes such as his ability to think about his own performance. The road map metaphor provided some insights as to where he had gone off-track in his reading progress. Note his departure in the following exchange about the new goat that had been wrapped in a blanket on the back seat of the car on the way home:

Text:
Milly's new home was the back paddock.

Reader:
Milly's new home was a blanket pocket.

Text:
Milly was put back in her paddock.

Reader:
Milly had pulled back her pocket.

While listening to himself on tape, he eventually self-corrected but his comment was illuminating:

Tutor: *How did you know it was wrong?*

Reader: (leaning on his hand): *I looked at the picture.*

Implications

A quick glance at the road map would suggest that my student had gone off-track at Stage Two. He was using partial phonetic cues – beginning and final letter clues only, meaning gained from a previous sentence and, of course, the picture. Perhaps taking in the overall look of the word was one of the negative sights he had seen when he

wandered off-track at an earlier stage in his reading development. I was beginning to ask myself questions about the strategies he learned early in his reading development. Did he just learn them or was he taught? The prompts that teachers model become the strategies children use when the teacher is no longer sitting beside them.

THE ONGOING DEBATE

So how does this relate to the ongoing debate over the convergence of phonics and whole language in the teaching of reading? Right there, when a reader comes to an unknown word. Prompts about the word itself relate specifically to phonics or code emphasis; prompts about meaning, context and visual attributes relate to whole language. Of course, reading is always a combination of high and low level skills. It is a mix of phonetic and cognitive ability. But the primary strategy used by good readers draws on their knowledge and their understanding of the written code they are cracking. The secondary strategies – relating to context – are used by good readers to check their initial attempts. Such prompts include: *Would that make sense? Does it sound right?*

Teachers who are unaware of the dangers encountered at this part of the "road" unwittingly reinforce any attempts the young reader makes by praising the reader for what could just be a good contextual guess. Unless word-level knowledge is used as the primary cue, they encourage children to rely on inadequate strategies which lead further off the path to strategic reading. Most Teachers claim to teach a variety of reading strategies. The debate has shifted. Again, it is no longer about whole language or phonics, but about "the extent to which one cue source should be given a greater or lesser emphasis than others in the decoding process" (Greaney, 2001, p.21). Results of his study about teacher prompts suggest that there may be problems inherent in early reading texts, which rely on predictable sentence patterns, and in encouraging young readers to rely on this, "teachers [unwittingly] encourage the reader to rely on [this] as the main cue source even at higher text levels" (Greaney, 2001, p.29). It is when the text becomes more difficult and less predictable that the reader needs word identification strategies.

Listen to teachers hearing children read: *"Try that again … read on … what might happen if … ? … get your mouth ready …"*. Good learners in any classroom will gain the insights necessary to crack the written code in spite of the method of teaching. They build up an understanding of how language works and use context clues to back up their attempts at decoding. Our struggling readers need to be taught what good readers already know – that letters are a way of representing sounds, and that they must have a minimal level of phonemic awareness, and the ability to pull short words apart into their individual sounds (phonemes). Cracking the code means looking at the word itself, understanding that the letters are representations of sounds, and then fine tuning its meaning by seeing how the context contributes to its meaning. The letters represent

the sounds of language. Little words are important. It is a high level skill and our good readers master it but our poor readers need to be taught. Conversely, by paying too much attention to context, "misreading" can occur. It is a low-level strategy – a back-up skill.

One of the earliest realisations the subject in my study gained about his reading behaviour was that he would often leave out small words in the text. It may be that he perceived the big words as being the difficult and therefore more important words.

Tutor: *Any surprises for you today?*

Reader: *Yes, the little errors I made.*

The significance of these little errors should not be underestimated, as was shown in the passage he read about an accident.

Text:
He saw no one was hurt.

Reader:
He saw that one was hurt.

The omission of this small word altered the meaning so that he missed the main point of the passage. It was not a real accident, but an ambulance drill.

As RTLB, how do we find out where a reader is on the path? Observe what they do when they come to an unknown word. Find out their level of word knowledge and teach the next skill. Bryant (1975) has a useful pseudoword assessment which tests a student's basic decoding skills. Not really reading because it's out of context? This assessment of ability to "read" nonsense words is an apt appraisal of competence with decoding print. If they cannot read 'jit' or 'gret' how will they ever read jitters or regret? The important thing is that teaching is sequential, and the stages and questions lead on to each other.

1. Phonemic awareness

2. An ability to say letter sounds/names

3. A recognition of sight words

4. A blending of sounds

5. A simple code for letter/sound relationships where one letter represents one sound

6. Recognition of vowel sounds

7. Consonant clusters?

8. A complex code where sounds can be represented by more than one letter?

(Deighton-O'Flynn, 2004)

So what of pausing, prompting and praising? Pause, of course, but let's take another look at the prompts, and therefore the praise. Are we so pleased that learner-readers have "almost got it" that we unwittingly miss the point – that

these poor strategies, left unchecked will eventually lead them off-track? It is my intention to challenge RTLB and other educators to look more closely at the reading strategies commonly modelled by teachers. Why is it that there is such a wide discrepancy between those who "get it" and those who don't, between our high achievers and our low achievers in literacy – a long tail, in fact?

It is my belief that for many of our struggling learners, school is too academic too soon. Lack of phonemic awareness is arguably the greatest predictor of a child becoming a poor reader (Pressley, 1998). Add to that poor fine motor and visual perceptual skills and coordination difficulties, and are we unwittingly teaching these children that there are no rules or principles in life – that it's all about contextual guessing? As Windsor (2004) notes in his discussion of postmodernism, our society is "more enamoured with the world than with the word, and with the context rather than the text" (p. 5).

There is a plethora of initiatives aimed at raising achievement and reducing disparity. Is our education system itself engaged in contextual guessing? Trying anything? Our prison inmates are characterised by their illiteracy. Is this the key to the relationship between learning and behaviour difficulties? If not, why the long tail?

REFERENCES

Awatere-Huata, D. (2002). *The Reading Race: how every child can learn to read.* Wellington: Huia Publishers.

Bryant (1975). Bryant Test of Basic Decoding Skills, cited in Tom Nicholson, *Teaching learners how to decode text* (workshop presented to Tuakau teachers 2004).

Coogan, M. (1999). *Self-tutoring: using the tape recorder to encourage metacognition in the reading process. Unpublished masters research project.* Massey University.

Deighton-O'Flynn, H. (2004). *Kiwiphonics Resource Manual.* Kiwiphonics Read New Zealand, Dunedin: University of Otago Press.

Deighton-O'Flynn, H., Miller, D., and Miller, B. (2003). How to use kiwi phonics. Instruction booklet for *Kiwiphonics Tool Kit Level 1.* Dunedin: University of Otago Press.

Fancy, H. (2004). Chief Executive's introduction. In *Educate: Ministry of Education Statement of Intent 2004-2005.*

Glynn, T., Dick, M., & Flower, D. (1987). *'Pause, prompt praise: A reading tutoring programme'.* Wellington: Specialist Education Services.

Greaney, K. (2001). An investigation of teacher preferences for word identification strategies. *Australasian Journal of language and Literacy,* 24(1), 21-30.

Maxim Institute (2003) *In harm's way: educational achievement of New Zealand pupils – an international comparison.*

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

Spear-Swerling, L. & Sternberg, R. (1996). *Off-track: When poor readers become "learning disabled."* United States of America: Westview Press.

Stanovich, K. (1986). Matthew effect in reading: The consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly,* 21, 360-407.

Tunmer, W., & Chapman, J. (1996). Whole language or whole nonsense? *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies,* 31, 77-84.

Windsor, P. (2004). Student, O student, wherefore art thou, student? *Canvas. Issue 33.*

PROFILE OF AUTHOR

Margaret Coogan (M. Ed. Special Education, BA, Dip Tchg) has worked as a Resource Teacher of Guidance and Learning, and is now an RTLB based at Pukekohe Intermediate. She is currently the national coordinator of the NZRTLB Association. This paper formed the basis of a presentation given to learning support teachers at their induction training workshop (SLS Initiative) in Palmerston North, July 2004.