

When Conversations Go Well: Investigating Oral Language Development in Reading Recovery

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My interest in examining the oral language development of Reading Recovery students emerged from my experience teaching Jake. His progress and instructional needs led me to think more about extending children's oral language development along with literacy development during Reading Recovery lessons. This led me to carry out an inquiry project that focused on two Reading Recovery teachers and six of their students.

This article includes a description of the information we collected, as well as illustrative examples of various teacher-child interactions that occurred during the writing component of Reading Recovery lessons. Also I present the informative remarks gleaned from my interviews of the teachers who participated in the project.

Thinking About Jake

Jake's scores on the Observation Survey tasks provided evidence that he used primarily meaning and structure cues and that he needed to learn how to search for and use visual information; I would need to teach hard to extend his meager knowledge of letters and words. As we moved out of Roaming Around the Known and into instruction, Jake responded positively. His knowledge of letters and words grew and his contributions during his writing of simple stories expanded. Early reading behaviors,

including the control of directional movement and one-to-one matching, came under more consistent control, and he was able to read Level 2 books easily following an appropriate orientation to the story.

Jake moved up in levels, but as I presented text with less predictable structures, Jake's pace of progress began to stall and I became puzzled. Was I wrong in thinking that he could use his growing knowledge of letters and words to read less predictable texts? To look for what I had missed, I went back over Jake's Observation Survey tasks and the summary I had written as well as my lesson records for him, including running records, looking for evidence of what I had not been teaching. I found my assumptions about Jake's control of the language structures presented in texts were not supported by my records. For example, I had taught him to recognize and write the word *can*, but his running records showed that he could not use that knowledge to problem solve the statement *Can we?* (a question structure that inverts the usual noun-verb pattern) in text. I concluded that I needed to know more about Jake's oral language. I began by seeking information from both his mother and his classroom teacher.

From Jake's mother, I learned that he had experienced chronic ear infections and that she had been informed

that his language development was delayed. Jake's classroom teacher explained he had difficulty following oral directions in class and seemed to take his cues from what the other children were doing. In addition to the information provided by Jake's mother and teacher, a check on his ability to repeat leveled sentences using the Record of Oral Language (Clay, Gill, Glynn, McNaughton, & Salmon, 1983) further confirmed the direction of my thinking which was that Jake was challenged by the types of language structures he was encountering in text.

With these new understandings, I rewrote Jake's predictions of progress and changed my teaching to include more opportunities across the Reading Recovery lesson to extend his oral language. Jake's pace of progress then picked up.

Although Jake continued to make accelerated progress in Reading Recovery, I remained concerned about why some of our conversations leading to the composition of a story during the writing component of the lesson went well, while others did not. Two conversations during alternative lessons exemplifying such differences are shown below.

Conversation 1

I returned to a previous conversation Jake and I were having while walking to the Reading Recovery room.

Janice: So Jake you were telling me... I was telling you about how my husband stepped in the mud. And you were telling me about how you were playing with cars on the weekend and went in the mud.

Jake: (no response)

Janice: Could you tell me about that?

Jake: (no response)

Janice: Whereabouts was the mud...by the house?

Jake: Ah...near the road.

Janice: Mmm...a good spot for playing with cars?

Jake: On the mud.

Janice: Yeah?

Jake: Ah...there's water.

Janice: Oh! That would be fun. You put your cars in the, in the water too?

Jake: Mmm.

Janice: All right.

Jake: But they're not my, my...they're not mine. They're my friend's.

Janice: Well, what could you say about that in the story today?

Jake: (pause) I played in the mud with my friend's car.

down a snowy hill on plastic bags. My intent was to link the picture to Jake's spring break outing at a ski resort where his family went snow tubing.

Janice: When I was looking at this picture it reminded me of what you were telling me about tubing when you were sliding down the hill. Did it look like that?

Jake: Uh-huh.

Janice: Tell me about it.

Jake: We, we... We, we all had to go...hold on to those things.

Janice: Did they have handles?

Jake: Yeah, and to, and to the other handle, and the other ones hold onto the other handles, and, and our friends came and the... and my mom and dad were right at the last and I was first.

Janice: Uh-huh.

Jake: And the next...and there's another one right beside me.

Janice: What could you say about that?

Jake: We went to Blue Mountain and we went on tubes and we hold onto handles three tries.

Janice: Okay. So you got to hold onto those handles so you wouldn't fall off, right?

Jake: Like I cracked my arm.

My lingering questions related to the variances in Jake's engagement and language production. Why did Conversation 2 (with more contributions from Jake) go well, while Conversation 1 (with limited oral language production) did not? These questions led me to yet further inquiry.

Specific Questions for Observation and Analysis

My reflections of both Jake's progress and our conversations stimulated my thinking about supporting children's oral language development in Reading Recovery. Closer analysis of our conversations convinced me that my discourse behaviors had an impact on his oral language production, including how much he had to say and how he brought his words together in new ways. My experience with Jake motivated me to explore oral language development further by observing other Reading Recovery teachers and children.

Assuming a development perspective, my inquiry was guided by two questions:

1. Are there observable teacher behaviors that support the trying out of new language by children in conversational exchanges with their teachers?
2. Can we identify examples of children trying on new language in teacher-child conversations during Reading Recovery lessons?

To explore these questions, the discourse behaviors of two Reading Recovery teachers each working with

Conversation 2

I started the conversation by referring to a picture of two children sliding



In Reading Recovery lessons, teachers have powerful opportunities to enhance oral language development of children.

three children were examined. The conversations between each teacher and child prior to writing the story composed by each student in three different lessons were observed, audiotaped, and transcribed. Therefore, the information collected included 18 conversations—three conversations with each of three children for two Reading Recovery teachers. The teachers' reflections on their discourse behaviors were gleaned through interviews after data had been collected.

Before discussing the results of the data analysis and interviews and presenting representative examples of conversations, I present a review of the literature on the nature of teacher–student interactions and language development. This literature gave direction to my analysis of the conversations recorded.

The Nature of Teacher and Child Interactions and Language Development

Cazden (2001) explored how teachers talk with children in ways that support the appropriation of new language. Both Cazden and Clay (1998) discuss how quality interactions personalize the conversation and suggest that the teacher's ability to personalize a conversation affects what learning occurs. Clay defines personalization in this context as the means by which the teacher brings the child's own experiences to bear on the topic (p. 31). For example, in Conversation 2 with Jake, the picture of children sliding down a snowy hill was a conversation starter, but our talk about his experience with sliding personalized it.

To personalize conversations with children, Lindfors (1999) suggests the

teacher seek “shared territory” (p. 170). In Lindfors' description of shared territory, she explains that when the teacher listens, she completes the child's communication act and allows the child—the speaker—to know that he or she has been understood. One of the results of being so in tune is observed when specific words are picked up and used by different participants, even young children, sometimes to the point of tedium (Clay, 2004).

An example of how young children try out new language comes from my nephew Connor. At 2½ years old, Connor received a truck packaged in a windowed box and wired to a piece of cardboard. He managed to open the box and, not seeing the wires, could not understand why he was not able to pull the truck away from its cardboard backing. “Oh look, Connor,” said his grandfather, “it's all wired up.” Pleased with the explanation, Connor picked up the truck—still attached to its cardboard backing—and proceeded to approach several of his cousins, each time saying, “Look! It's all wired up.”

Cazden (2001) used the term *appropriation* to describe the picking up of new language by the child. Appropriation, according to Cazden's definition, implies the active transformation of knowledge, and this is distinct from the passive transfer of information that has the qualities of a recitation and is unidirectional.

Appropriation of language can also be reciprocal. The teacher can appropriate a child's utterance in order to revoice or reformulate it into a more mature form. Then the teacher's language will be out there for the child's subsequent appropriation if it is the “just-in-time” language the child needs to be

understood (Cazden, 2001, p. 96). For example, when Jake was telling me about holding onto “those things” when snow tubing, I reformulated his words when I said, “Did they have handles?” And handles became just-in-time language support for Jake as evident in his subsequent use of the word in his talk and in composing his story.

Fullerton and DeFord (2002) studied teacher and child conversations to uncover patterns of discourse that worked well with Reading Recovery children. Their analysis identified repetition of the child’s idea by the teacher to be a constant type of teacher behavior that served several purposes, including

- to help the child remember,
- to support the child as he or she began to write,
- to serve as a place-holder helping the child attend to and hold his or her idea in memory,
- to allow the child to further expand an idea, and
- to indicate that the teacher is listening and accepts the child’s oral production. (p. 9)

Fullerton and DeFord’s description of how teachers use repetition of the child’s words fits with Cazden’s (2001) and Clay’s (1991, 1998) theory that reformulation of a child’s utterance can provide a form of language support for young children.

In conclusion, the review of the literature discussing teacher–child interactions and their contributions to a child’s oral language development reveals that the personalization of the conversation and reformulation of the child’s utterance are two discourse

behaviors that support children in appropriating new language, just as observed in the snow tubing conversation with Jake.

Analyzing the Data

For the initial analysis, transcripts of lesson conversations for each teacher with three students were examined. If evidence of teacher personalization was observed, I labeled the conversation personalized and then tabulated the counts. Next, each occurrence of a teacher’s reformulation of a child’s language, or utterance, within the conversations was counted and tabled as teacher reformulation. The resulting counts are presented in Table 1. In addition, for each of the six children the transcripts were analyzed to identify all examples of a child’s appropriation of new language, i.e., the child’s use of new words or new ways of putting words together. The total counts for each teacher’s three children are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that Teacher A personalized eight of the nine conversations with her three children. Within those conversations, there were 18 occasions when she reformulated a child’s utterance, and on nine occasions language from her reformulations was appropriated by a child.

Table 1. Teacher Personalization and Reformulation and Child Appropriations

	Teacher A	Teacher B
Teacher Personalization (N = 9)	8	7
Teacher Reformulation	18	12
Child Appropriations	9	7

Teacher B personalized seven of the nine conversations with her three Reading Recovery students. Reformulation of a child’s utterances occurred 12 times, and children appropriated language from the teacher’s talk 7 times.

Specific Examples of Teacher Personalization and Reformulation, and Reading Recovery Students’ Language Appropriation

The following examples illustrate the teacher discourse techniques of personalization and reformulation used by the two Reading Recovery teachers studied and show how these techniques supported their six children in appropriating new language.

Example 1

The child was invited to tell his teacher something about his budgie (a parakeet). The teacher started the conversation by talking about her budgie but personalized the conversation by eliciting the child’s experience with his budgie. She reformulated a long episodic utterance by the child in which *climbed up* was the just-in-time language support for what he wanted to say.

Teacher: Let’s write something about what your budgie did in the mirror. What could you say about that?

Child: He was looking in it then he was...he was...then he was running in the cage, then he was putting fruit in...in it then he was not eating it then he was running away.

Teacher: Was he?
 Child: Yes.
 Teacher: Around the cage.
 (reformulation)

Child: He was running in the cage from the fruit.
 Child: Petals. (appropriation)
 (a few exchanges later)

Teacher: Was he?
 Child: Yes.
 Child: I like green and yellow daffodils.

Teacher: Oh, I bet he ate it when you weren't looking. Didn't he?
 Teacher: Yes, so do I. They're always beautiful yellow colors, daffodils.
 (reformulation)

Child: No! He was then he...he just, just went walking, walking, walking, then, then he got, got, he was... trying to got up but he couldn't.
 Child: And always this daffodil, umm, gots little, tiny stuff.
 (appropriation)

Teacher: He climbed up the cage! (reformulation)

Child: Cause our cage is bigger, bigger and he climbs up and he, he jumps.
 (appropriation)

Teacher: Really!

The teacher personalized the conversation by going with what was meaningful to the child about her daffodil. The teacher reformulated the child's information about what was lost when she provided the word *petals* which the child appropriated. Further into the conversation, the teacher's use of *always* was also appropriated by the child in her next utterance.

Example 2

Child: My old daffodil lost.
 Teacher: Is it? What happened to it?
 Child: It lost its flower.
 Teacher: Its petals—these lovely parts in here. Did it lose its petals?
 (reformulation)
 (a few moves later in the conversation)
 Teacher: All right. Well let's just look at it...look at your new flower...

Example 3

Teacher: Today you told me that dinosaurs were one of your favorite things. Do you think you could make up an interesting story about a dinosaur?
 Child: Maybe.
 Teacher: Being hungry? We have a deadly python eating a wild hairy pig. What might a dinosaur eat?

Child: Every dinosaur I know would eat, umm, meat is a wild one.

Teacher: The wild dinosaurs eat meat?
 (reformulation)
 What kind of meat do they like?

Child: All types.

Teacher: All types of meat. Okay, how could we say that in an interesting way?

Child: The other dinosaurs eat only grass.

Teacher: Are you going to write about the ones that eat meat or the nice gentle ones that eat grass and leaves?
 (reformulation)

Child: The nice gentle ones.
 (appropriation)

Teacher: Okay, how could you say that?

(wait of 3 seconds)

Child: There are different type of dinosaurs and the gentle ones are not harmless...are harmless, I mean.
 (appropriation)

Teacher: Are harmless. Beautiful.

Although the teacher decided on the topic of conversation, she followed the child's thinking. In reformulating the child's information about dinosaurs that eat only grass, she introduced the notion that grass-eating dinosaurs are gentle which the child then appropriated.

Example 4

In this example personalization is evident in the teacher's response to the child's view of spiders. Reformulation is evident in the teacher's rephrasing of what the child says using mature grammar, and the teacher's phrase *makes it scary* is appropriated by the child.

Teacher: It's got long legs, doesn't it? What else? Come on, look at its scary face.

Child: No, it's not.

Teacher: All right.

Child: It's got these that are little nothing else.

Teacher: So you're not scared of spiders.

(a few moves later in the conversation)

Teacher: My! Look at his eyes.

Child: Is red.

Teacher: They're red. (reformulation) I wouldn't want to see that!

Child: (laughs)

Teacher: If I saw one of those, I'd scream!

Child: They try and get you.

Teacher: Look what it's got. Look at it. Tell me what it's got on it. You can see what makes it scary.

Child: It got legs.

Teacher: Mmm... It's got...

Child: Make it scary and this. (appropriation)

Teacher: Long, scary legs.

Example 5

The teacher has difficulty getting the child engaged in the conversation. She appears ready to reformulate then holds back while the child's inventory personalizes the conversation. Later, the teacher's reformulation serves to paraphrase the child's contributions, and the suggestion of the word *everybody* may have led the child to use the word *everyone* in his composition.

Teacher: Who was playing soccer?

(wait of 3 seconds)

Teacher: Was it just year one?

Child: (shakes his head to indicate not)

Teacher: No? Who else?

(wait of 1 second)

Teacher: Just your class?

Child: No.

Teacher: No?

Child: Room eight and room four.

Teacher: So room...

Child: Eight and room four and nine.

Teacher: Room eight and room four and room nine, what were you all doing?

Child: And room 10.

Teacher: And room 10! What were you doing?

Child: And room seven and room two and three.

Teacher: That sounds like everybody. (reformulation) Do you think? All right.

How could we write that down?

(wait of 3 seconds)

Teacher: Could we say that everybody or the whole school? What would sound more interesting? What could you say about the whole school playing soccer?

Child: Everyone played soccer. (appropriation) That's what I doesn't.

Teacher: Okay, everyone is playing...you didn't though? (reformulation)

Child: Yeah but I, I was...shut all the classroom...playing computer.

Teacher: Ah... because you were sick.

Child: (nods)

Interviews of the Reading Recovery Teachers Understandings

I conducted follow-up interviews with the Reading Recovery teachers in order to learn more about personalization and reformulation as conversation outcomes, based upon the insights they could share with me.

Exploring personalization during the interviews

By applying Clay's (1998) definition of personalization to the analysis of their conversations with children, I found that the two teachers personalized conversations with each of their students. In my interviews of these teachers following their lessons,



Follow-up interviews with the Reading Recovery teachers offered opportunities to learn more about personalization and reformulation as conversation outcomes.

I confirmed my observations and added to my understanding of how personalization assists language development. I present excerpts from these interviews below organized as three general conclusions.

Conversations are personalized when the teacher is able to talk about the child's own experience with a topic. The teacher decides on the topic of conversation but lets the child's experiences dictate the direction of the conversation. The teacher's reflections on the conversation about the budgie (Example 1), illustrates this.

I think he was much more involved and it went better because I tried to pick something that he'd had a bit of experience and we talked about that yesterday. I'd introduced the story about the budgie and he said he'd had a budgie which had flown away. And I knew

they had because they bought it at a pet shop once. So I thought that went better and he got much more involved.

Conversations are personalized when the teacher accepts the child's view on a subject. In the conversation about the spider (Example 4), the teacher accepts the child's assertion that he is not afraid of spiders. The teacher explained:

Yes, he became involved and he liked the spider. He was maintaining his independence, not going down this track I wanted which is fine and I thought well, okay, I won't push it. He obviously wasn't going to talk about the color of the red eyes...But I went with that he's not scared of spiders. And so I think the conversation went fine.

Conversations are personalized when the child is able to talk about what he or she finds interesting. In the conversation about the daffodil (Example 2), the teacher set the topic and then opened it up to the child. What occurred may have surprised the teacher but also resulted in the child forging ahead and using new language. The teacher explained:

I was trying to get her to look a bit more at the daffodil. But she was more interested in the function of losing it and buying another one, wasn't she? Still, that's all right.

Perhaps personalization in this way increases the potential for appropriation of new language by getting the child talking. If a child forges into the conversation with lots to say the teacher has a greater opportunity to support language development than if the child pulls back from the conversation (Clay, 2001).

Exploring reformulation during the interviews

The transcripts also contained many examples of a teacher reformulating a child's utterances, and my analysis of how reformulation was used by the teachers expands Cazden's (2001) definition and builds on Fullerton and DeFord's (2002) notion of the teacher repeating the child's idea. In the 30 examples of reformulation identified in this study, I found the teachers used reformulation

- to summarize a long episodic conversation,
- to rephrase the child's previous utterance using standard grammar,
- to put an idea into the child's head,

- to take the child's meaning but say it in a different way, and
- to help the child pull together more than one idea.

In one interview the teacher expressed her understanding of how the reformulation of a child's utterance can put an idea into a child's head. This teacher shared the following:

She's very willing to talk and full of lots of ideas and even though I fed in the ideas about wagging and barking, she brought out the idea *little black nose*. So, that was good.

And in another interview the teacher showed her awareness of how reformulation of a child's language keeps the conversation focused around one idea:

He really wanted to talk about dinosaurs. So I let him write about the dinosaurs, but then his idea starts and it just snowballs. So it's just like keeping hold of a runaway train. He had lots of ideas about it eating meat and other dinosaurs that were harmless. But you just have to focus him down and write about that idea.

Observations Made Relative to Appropriation of New Language by Reading Recovery Students

The number of appropriations in relation to the number of reformulations in the transcripts led me to think about why reformulating a child's utterance does not always lead to the use of new language by the child. This observation fits with Cazden's (2001) description of how the teacher may put language into a

conversation for the possible use by the child. However, the appropriation of language is selective and useful from the child's perspective. What the child chooses to appropriate appears to be language that is just within his or her grasp and necessary or useful in making the message clear in the context of conversation.

The syntactic structures of the appropriated language were unique to the individual children but in each case increased the complexity of the subsequent utterance. The syntactic structures of the appropriated language are categorized as follows:

1. a verb, for example, the appropriation of *climbs* to express *trying to go up*
2. an adverb, such as *always*
3. a verb phrase, for example *make it scary*
4. a new vocabulary word (e. g., a noun) when *lost its flower* becomes *lost its petals*
5. a more succinct way to express an idea, for example using the word *everybody* in place of *room eight, room four and room nine*
6. a more descriptive phrase to express an idea, such as *the other dinosaurs* becoming *the gentle dinosaurs*

Common across all the conversations were children selectively appropriating language introduced by the teacher through reformulation and providing a new way of saying something, or a flexible variation on something that was partially known (Clay, 2004), or a new addition to an expanding vocabulary.

Conclusions

My inquiry of oral language development in the context of Reading Recovery lessons was initiated by my observations of and questions about my student, Jake. The resulting project, although limited to a small sample of two teachers and six Reading Recovery children, extended my understanding of the research and suggestions of Cazden (2001), Clay (1998, 2004), Lindfors (1999), and Fullerton and DeFord (2002).

The teacher-child exchanges examined confirm that the teacher discourse techniques of personalization and reformulation supported the six children in appropriating new language. These findings begin to answer my questions and suggest that when Reading Recovery teachers capitalize on daily opportunities to interact personally with students and engage them in conversations that are of interest to them, they assist their children in increasing the complexity of their language. In our individual Reading Recovery lessons, teachers have a powerful opportunity to enhance the oral language development of the children.

These findings resonate with Clay's (2004) suggestion that "if we plan instruction that links oral language and literacy learning (writing and reading) from the start—so that writing and reading and oral language processing move forward together, linked and patterned from the start—that instruction will be more powerful" (Clay, 2001). In conclusion, children learn language easily through conversation (Clay 2004), and teacher's discourse behaviors during lesson conversations—specifically personalization of the conversations and reformulation

of children's utterances—support children in appropriating new language and impact language learning substantially.

Editor's Note: Readers are referred to Marie M. Clay's article, "Talking, Reading, and Writing" published in *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, Spring 2004, for more extended discussion of oral language development in young children and specific suggestions for enhancing the language development of learners experiencing literacy learning difficulties.

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About the Cover

Vanessa Corona is a first-grade student at Frank D. Moates Elementary School in Glenn Heights, Texas. Her Reading Recovery teacher, Cynthia Westbrook, began Vanessa's Reading Recovery lessons last August at Level 0; lessons were discontinued in late January. Her classroom teacher, Debbie Wingert, expects Vanessa to be reading at Level 18 by the end of the year. Vanessa shares that she enjoys reading to her brothers and likes to go swimming with her family.

