Reading Books and Discussing Stories: Constructing Knowledge Through Talk

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Note: All names are pseudonyms.

Introduction

Reading Recovery teachers are encouraged to articulate their thoughts during the teaching and discussions sections of their in-service sessions (Clay & Watson, 1982; Pinnell, 1991). “I’ve just thought of this!” or “I was wondering…” are frequently heard preambles to an insight a teacher is about to talk over with colleagues. From the perspective of Kintch’s (1994) constructive-integration theory, such talk facilitates the integration of new knowledge into existing knowledge networks. In our training context, this means that teachers develop understandings of Reading Recovery theory and practice as a result of conversation, or their talk with others. The very act of articulating our thinking supports the constructive process.

Clay’s support for considering the contributions of Kintch’s theory to explaining how children read text makes me wonder if constructive-integration theory also applies to how young children construct understandings of the messages in the stories they read and discuss. I additionally wonder if children acquire facility with the language of stories through teacher-child conversations about stories.

Linking and Making Connections Through Talk

Language involves lots of brain parts working together as a symphony and some learning is (about) how to feed minor parts into an on-going symphony.

(Squire, 1996, as cited in Clay, 2005b, p. 102)

My interest in how young children construct understandings of what they read and how they extend their oral language competency through conversations with teachers about stories follows from earlier research on children’s oral language development in the context of child-teacher conversations before writing (Fullerton & DeFord, 2002; Van Dyke, 2006). As teachers engage children in talking about the stories they have read to create new messages to write, they model, encourage, and scaffold children’s use of book language. Often specific terms and structures that may have been unfamiliar to the child become part of the written messages. This is an example of supporting new learning through conversation and interactive writing. This article focuses on learning that may occur through conversations following text reading.

Clay reminds us in Literacy Lessons Part Two that texts can leave children confused and suggests that a brief conversation during which meanings can be negotiated “gives the message that we must understand what we have read” (2005b, p. 98). Clay’s reminder leads me to wonder…

1. Does responding to a story through conversation deepen a child’s understanding of the messages of the story?

2. If so, what sort of teaching might support the message-getting process?

3. Could transcripts of teacher-child conversations about a story that the child has read provide evidence of the construction of understanding and the appropriation of book language into the child’s talk?

With these questions to guide my analyses, I examined audiotaped conversations during which Reading Recovery children were invited to talk with me about familiar stories. Transcripts of those conversations were examined for

• evidence of how the children were making links to existing knowledge and connections between events in the story through talk,

• evidence of teaching decisions that engaged children
in conversations about the stories, and
• evidence of the children’s use of the language of the stories in their talk.

Responding to a Story Through Conversation

Retelling from a child’s perspective

Teachers need to consider what they are asking children to do during the retelling of a story familiar to both the child and the teacher from the child’s perspective. The following example shows how Francine responded to my invitation to retell the story of Ben’s Dad (Level 7), familiar to both of us. Analyzing this transcript prompted me to give the child’s perspective more consideration.

Teacher: Tell me what this story is about.
Francine: Ben’s dad?
Teacher: Uh huh.
Francine: Ben was painting…umm…a picture for his dad.
Teacher: Oh.
Francine: And…and the teacher said, “Ben look! Here is your dad.” And Ben…and dad said, “Dad, dad!” I mean, Ben said, “Dad, dad!” And dad said, “Ben, Ben.”

Francine responded to my invitation with a simple and somewhat hesitant narrative. Although she managed to sort out who was greeting whom in the story, I wondered if a different type of invitation would have generated more talk and therefore more insight into her understanding of this lovely story about the excitement of anticipation and the joy of surprise and reunion. I gave this further consideration in my ongoing teaching by planning to provide more open-ended invitations to the children.

Responding to an open invitation

Compare Francine’s response to the following remarks of Samuel, whose invitation to discuss what interested him about the story of Mother Tiger and Her Cubs (Level 11) was more open ended.

(Samuel turned back to a page in the text)

Teacher: What’s happening here?
Samuel: This page is really cool to me cause…umm…I like it when tigers…umm…bend down in the grass and I know what they do it for cause I’ve seen a real one do that before. And…umm…they do that cause they’ve got really good skin and the…umm…really bendish and they can bend really low and…umm…cause some…umm…grasses are orange and they hide in the orange grass or in white grass or in green grass or there’s lots of yellow and green grass. And once something comes by they jump out and kill it and eat it. Unless it’s a tiger.

Teacher: Meanwhile, what’s happening here?
Samuel: The baby tigers are going out away from the mom to go and find the wild.

Samuel responded eagerly to this opportunity to confirm his knowledge of tigers reflected in the story. His comment invited feedback, characteristic of conversational discourse, and provided me with an opportunity as teachers engage children in talking about the stories they have read to create new messages to write, they model, encourage, and scaffold children’s use of book language.
to direct his attention to a connection between two events in the story: while mother tiger is out hunting, her cubs leave the safety of their den.

When conversational discourse begins with the child’s observation, the teacher gains the child’s attention (Johnston, 2004) immediately. Samuel’s comment established the focus from which I extended the conversation, and this allowed me to further assess how he communicated his understanding of the actions in the story.

It is useful for teachers to consider the distinction between oral narrative and oral discourse when thinking about what they are asking of children. In response to my invitation to retell the story of Ben’s Dad, Francine gave an oral narrative, characterized by recitation of units of text in a sequenced presentation of events. As the listener, I remained in a passive role. In comparison, my opening comment to Samuel invited him to engage in an oral discourse about Mother Tiger and Her Cubs. The outcome was a conversational exchange, with both parties relying on feedback from each other to be sure the message was received and understood (Kaderavek & Mandlebaum, 1993). This appeared to offer more opportunities for learning.

**Retelling as part of a standardized assessment of comprehension**

As a result of state and provincial requirements, school districts in the United States and Canada have mandated standardized reading assessment tools for all primary students, including Grade 1 students learning how to read. A standardized retelling of stories is often part of the assessment. Without the support of an orientation to the characters, important events, or vocabulary of the story prior to the first reading, the teacher is instructed to assess how well the child understands the messages of the text by inviting the child, after reading, to retell the story and answer questions about the story. During the retelling part of the assessment, the teacher listens for how well the child makes references to the characters and retells important events in sequence using vocabulary from the story.

The teacher is reminded to remain a neutral observer and only provide prompting from a suggested list as required to further engage the student in the task. The child’s responses are evaluated within the limitations of the standardized procedure. Examples of suggested retelling prompts from the *PM Benchmark Kit Assessment Procedures* (Nelly & Smith, 2001) for a narrative text follow:

- Who was the story about?
- Where does the story happen?
- What was the problem in the story?
- What do they do about it? What else did they do?
- How does it end? How did it turn out?
- Did anything else happen?

Johnston (2004) cautions teachers to be aware of the limitations of a standardized approach to retelling where the teacher has the distinction of being the one who knows what is important. A related caution is offered by Clay (2002) who comments, “The answers to comprehension questions depend more upon the difficulty of the sentence structure of the question than on the child’s reading, according to research” (p. 61).

**Engaging Children in Conversation in Reading Recovery Lessons**

With Johnston and Clay’s comments and cautions to think about, Reading Recovery teachers must view their conversations about stories with their Reading Recovery children as different from a standardized retelling. Within the Reading Recovery lesson, an individualized approach means a flexible approach with careful monitoring of how the teacher’s questions and comments are received by the child. When done well, Clay (2002) notes that “Conversation with a child about a story…adds to the teacher’s understanding of the reader in useful ways, and leads the child into discourse about stories” (p. 61). Clay guides teachers to engage children in oral discourse where, with teacher input, there is greater scope for learning to occur. Furthermore, by engaging in conversations about stories, children learn that we can talk about the stories we read, and that extracting the meaning of the story is the whole point to the reading experience (Clay, 1991, 2005b).

In *Literacy Lessons Part Two*, Clay suggests, “After any of the two or three familiar books, teacher and child may discuss the story (focusing on what it meant to the child)” (2005b, p. 88). After reading the story Tiger, Tiger (Level 3), my student, Zeb, launched into an anecdote about a time when his sister was carrying a box down the outside steps to his house. The size of the box prevented Zeb’s sister from seeing a puddle at the bottom of the steps. While Zeb dramatized how his moth-
er called out, “Watch out for the puddle!” I understood his connection with the message in *Tiger, Tiger*. Just like Mother Monkey, Zeb’s mother was watching out for her children.

Clay (2005b) suggests that a brief conversation, or a good question, after the first reading of a story can reveal a wealth of understanding and evidence of confusions or missing information. In the following conversation with Samuel which occurred after his reading of *Tabby in the Tree* (Level 10), it was evident that he had missed an important link between events: how a dish of canned fish placed under the tree lured Tabby down. This observation gave me the opportunity to explore the events of the story with him in more detail in order to help him gain new understandings.

Samuel: The part I like is when the dog gets chased away, because I don’t like other animals to chase him.

Teacher: So the dog gets chased away and then what happens?

Samuel: And then Tabby gets up the tree and he refuses to come down.

Teacher: So?

Samuel: So he...he stayed up there for...for a long while until he came down. Then Miss Green baked a fish.

Teacher input to support linking and making connections

Clay (2005a) describes the path along which each child has come to us as “individual and unusual” (p. 47). She suggests that we can expect diversity in what children bring to their understanding of the author’s message and to what captures their attention. Roaming Around the Known provides the perfect opportunity for Reading Recovery teachers to begin engaging children in conversations about stories “within which literacy learning becomes the focus” (Clay, 2005a, p. 34). Once a child accepts the teacher’s invitation to engage in discourse about stories, and if the teacher tunes into the child’s thinking, the teacher can responsively direct the child to some new learning. The following conversations exemplify attempts to support each child’s linking, connecting, and understanding.

Amanda was early in her series of lessons when we had this conversation about *The Party* (Level 1).

Amanda: This...this little dolly is having the birthday party. And this little dolly having cakes, tarts, cake, table and a...chair.

Teacher: Sounds like a lovely party. You need all those things.

Amanda: After the cake is...like...a...the cake. There is the cake sits.

Amanda’s first comment led me to suspect that she was missing the connection between the items featured on the pages to the concept of party, and this prompted my responses and contributions to our conversation. “There is the cake sits” established her connection between the table and the cake.

*Blackberries* (Level 6) was already one of Jonathan’s favorite stories when we had this conversation.

Teacher: What happens at the end here?

Jonathan: I don’t know what happens here.

Teacher: Look what’s going on there.

Jonathan: Mmm…

Teacher: Look at what he’s pointing to.

Jonathan: To his tummy.

It appeared that without my input, Jonathan would not have connected the text he had just read with the actions in the illustrations. In reflecting on this conversation, I wondered why Jonathan had not been able to draw the threads of the story together and considered the importance of the entire book reading experience. All aspects, including the book introduction, conversations during and after the first reading, and any subsequent conversations following rereadings of the story contribute to the child’s enhanced reading and thinking, including gaining new understandings. This warrants further consideration.

### Linking up the entire story reading experience

The conversation that Reading Recovery teachers and children engage in following the first reading of a story ties together the entire story reading experience, beginning with the book choice and ending with a quick conversation about the story after reading. Clay (2005b) instructs teachers to select books keeping in mind:

- what the child will want to read,
- how the story relates to the child’s personal knowledge,
• what the child will succeed with and enjoy, and
• how the book contributes to establishing new competencies, including how to find and use information to understand the message of the story.

An individualized orientation to the story prepares the child for the journey so that he approaches the first reading with a sense of the story constructed in his mind. A brief conversation following the first reading ties together the entire book reading experience: the orientation to the story, the first reading of the story, and what the child thinks about the story based upon what was anticipated to occur. These brief but deliberate teacher-child conversations give the message that the whole story is the point of the reading activity (Clay, 2005b) and that readers are entitled to understand what they read (Paley, 1981).

Teacher questions
Teachers also pose questions, and these may serve as a check of the reader’s understanding or as a way to direct the child’s attention to something new. In the following two examples from Literacy Lessons (Clay, 2005b, p. 97), questions were directed toward either enhancing understanding of story events or making inferences.

Questions after reading The Hungry Giant’s Soup (Level 12)
Teacher: What happened to his bommy-knocker?
Child (an English language learner): …in the tub.
Teacher: Was it in the tub?
Child: No, in the fire. It burned all up. The fire cook the soup.

Questions indicating the child’s ability to infer what will likely happen next after reading Quack, Quack, Quack (Level 16)
Teacher: What do you think dad is going to do now?
Child: He’s going to act like a frog and jump around. Like on TV’s funniest videos.

I return to my conversation with Samuel following his reading of Mother Tiger and Her Cubs to remind teachers of the value of open-ended questions. His remarks revealed his unique background of information about tigers and reminded me of Johnston’s (2004) argument that teachers do not hold a monopoly on what’s worth noticing and discussing.

After reading Mother Tiger and Her Cubs
Samuel: I don’t know why she’s after the baby pig. The baby pig is not enough for mother tigers usually.

Additional considerations regarding questioning are suggested by Lindfors (1991) who tells teachers that “our own questioning is not simply questioning, rather it is a way of questioning” (p. 420). Lindfors’ view on questioning children reminds us to carefully monitor our student’s understanding of our questions. The following observation illustrates how literally a child comprehended the language of his teacher’s question:

After reading the story Baby Bear Goes Fishing (Level 7), a Reading Recovery teacher asked her student, “What do you like to eat with fish?” Observing the puzzled look on the child’s face I wondered if the child was thinking, “I don’t eat with fish!” Also picking up on the child’s puzzlement, the teacher quickly reformulated her question and the conversation was able to continue.

As Lindfors (1991) explains, “When we sense a child’s puzzlement…we can at least pause and ask ourselves: What sense is this child making of this exchange?” (p. 420)

In summary, Clay, Johnston, and Lindfors give teachers important considerations in regard to posing questions and to helping young readers gain enhanced understandings from their reading.

Using the Literary Language of Stories in Conversation
Reading stories and then talking about them links oral and written language. Teacher-child conversation about stories provides a context for children to extend their oral language with opportunities to use the literary language of text in their talk. As the following examples show, Natalie and Amanda, both English language learners, appropriated vocabulary and literary phrases from the pages of their stories into their talk about their readings. Examples of the story language appropriated by the child is in italics.

Natalie talking about Teasing Dad (Level 11)
Teacher: Oh, they’re having a good time aren’t they?
Natalie: And dad…this one is funny one—the water went all over dad.
Teacher: You know what’s going to happen.
Natalie: Yea. They all run and dad went faster. Got you naughty monkeys!

Teacher: Oh, that’s what he calls them.

Natalie: Yea and...and dad put them in the water.

Natalie talking about Mrs. Spider’s Beautiful Web (Level 13)
Natalie: And this one (referring to the pictures in the book) the spider was hiding. The spider said, “It’s so sticky”. Then the spider hid in there. The fly came and he go in Mrs. Spider’s web. After it’s finished, now Mrs. Spider look at the...her web and it was broken and she worked all night. In the morning it was all better again.

Natalie talking about Chicken Licken (Level 16)
Natalie: Fox Lox took them to the den.

Teacher: Mmm.

Natalie: “Well, well, well” said Fox Lox. And then here Fox Lox and there Fox Lox’s den. Then the little squirrel call down, “Do not go there!” because Fox Lox will eat them. So they went as fast as they could and then back home. But they never tell the king that the sky is falling.

Amanda talking about The Party (Level 1)
Amanda: This...this little dolly is having the birthday party. And this little dolly having cakes, tarts, cake, table and a...chair.

Teacher: Sounds like a lovely party. You need all those things.

Amanda: After the cake is...like...a...the cake. There is the cake sits.

Amanda talking about Run Rabbit Run! (Level 5)
Amanda: (referring to a picture in the text) There’s the rabbit hole and here’s the rabbit and the hole. The rabbit’s home is in this hole. There’s a dog going to eat this rabbit and the rabbit runs. But the rabbit can’t see it. The rabbit sees it right now. The rabbit runs. And the...when goes into the hole then he’s safe. Run rabbit run.

Amanda talking about The Bumper Car (Level 4)
Amanda: Okay, this is James, this is Kate, this is Nick, and this is dad. James and Kate...Nick and Katie want to go in...Nick and Kate want to go in...Nick, Nick and Kate want to go in the blue-red car.

Teacher: Uh huh.

Amanda: And they go. Ja-Jamie and Kate, Kate want to go in the red car. And dad, dad wants to go...Dad and Nick want to go in the blue car. And then after that Nick says, “Watch out” shou-ted, shouted Nick.

Teacher: Oh dear!

Amanda: And after that they went...After that the bumper cars went bump.

Observing the child’s language complexity
Teachers who are familiar with the stories discussed by Natalie and Amanda will be able to pick out just where the children appropriated the literary language of the text in their conversational utterances. Literary phrases such as “Run rabbit run,” “Well, well, well,” and “Got you naughty monkeys” are easily picked out. More subtle is the children’s use of common language which, linguists will argue, requires ongoing sorting and learning by all language learners (Pinker, 1999).

Taking a second look at Natalie’s transcripts, recorded at 3-week intervals, provides evidence of her control of the following aspects of language:

- irregular verbs (go/went, do/did, is/was)
- the correct use of the objective pronoun them as in “put them” rather than the proper nouns Sam and Rachel
- this as an adjective as in “this one"
- all as an adverb, in “all over” and “all better”, and as an indefinite pronoun in “they all run”
- there as an indefinite pronoun in “there is” and as an adverb in “Don’t go there”
- monitoring her language when switching tack and using the adjective her rather than the definite article the with “the...her web”

Similar observations of language learning were found in the transcripts of Amanda’s oral language, also recorded at 3-week intervals. These reveal that she
• sorted out the indefinite article *a* and the definite article *the*,
• used the irregular verb *went* correctly,
• sorted out verb agreement with *want/wants and go/goes*, and
• was able to use *this* as an adjective as in “this hole” and as a pronoun as in “this is Dad.”

Each child’s oral language, as observed in the transcripts of Natalie and Amanda, suggested implications for my teaching. This is because listening to the language a child typically uses in conversation provides teachers with indication of specific language structures that may baffle, puzzle, or surprise the child when reading text. For example, if the child typically says, “I goed…” then a story that reads “Tom *went* to the store for Mom” poses a challenge. Or, the child who does not use the definite article *the* in his talk may be baffled by its use in a story. The teacher has to plan for such challenges and scaffold accordingly. She may even decide not select a text on the basis of its unusual language (for a particular child), and this includes both the vocabulary and sentence structures presented in the text.

**Conclusions**

My analyses of transcripts of teacher-child conversations provide evidence of how talking about a story can be used by Reading Recovery teachers to reveal what is meaningful to a child and to provide opportunities for the teacher to both assess comprehension and extend understandings as needed. My findings answer my first question and appear to confirm that responding to a story through conversation does offer rich opportunities to deepen a child’s understanding of the messages of stories.

More specifically, by assessing the content and quality of the child’s talk, the teacher is able to respond to the child’s grasp of the message of the story. Through conversation, the teacher is able to support the child in constructing understandings of the story, linking new knowledge to existing knowledge networks, and making new connections (Clay, 2001; Kintch, 1994). Conversations about a story can also uncover confusions that block learning and require teacher assistance to negotiate; and above all, conversations build awareness that understanding the message of the story is the whole point of the reading experience (Clay, 2005b).

The review of the transcripts also helps to identify beneficial approaches for engaging Reading Recovery children in productive conversations. Based on my interactions with students, it appeared that productive conversations occurred when the teacher and child established a joint focus (Clay, 1998), and the children were free to talk about what captured their interests. The analyses also revealed that the approach that produced the greatest amount of talk involved posing an open-ended invitation for conversational discourse. It appeared that inviting the child into conversation provided more opportunity for constructing knowledge by linking and making connections. I did not find that asking a child to retell a story in a standardized way was as productive.

An additional discovery in the transcripts of the children’s conversations is evidence to address my question concerning the appropriation of book language by Reading Recovery children. The examples in the transcripts show that children do acquire and use both new vocabulary and new language structures in talking about the stories they have read. Considering the examination of transcripts...
recorded in 3-week intervals suggests that oral language development is occurring over the course of our lessons, and Reading Recovery teachers have many important opportunities to impact this new learning through daily conversations that are personalized and supportive.

In conclusion, this review of transcripts of teacher-child conversations about familiar stories confirms the importance and multiple benefits of engaging Reading Recovery children in authentic, oral discourse daily. It also appears that it is very beneficial to continue pursuing Clay’s (2005b) suggestion that much is to be learned by examining applications of Kintch’s (1994) constructive-integration theory to our considerations of our young readers.

References

Children’s Books Cited
Chicken Licken. Sam Childs, illustrator.
First Favourite Tales: Ladybird Books.
Baby Bear Goes Fishing
Ben’s Dad
Blackberries
Mrs. Spider’s Beautiful Web
Tabby in the Tree
Tiger, Tiger
Mother Tiger and Her Cubs
Run Rabbit Run

About the Author
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