Teaching Students to Confirm Using Sound and Letter Knowledge

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All children's names are pseudonyms.

Surprisingly, you will not be able to find the term confirming in any index of Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals (Clay, 2005a, 2005b). This is probably because there is so much more involved in the process than simply knowing if something is right. How do you even know if you are right? What happens if you are not right? When Clay (2005b) writes on this topic, she explains “Reading Recovery teachers have to change passive poor readers into readers who search actively for information in print that can help them. Two things help. They try out possible responses, and they learn how to verify their decisions” (p. 102).

Confirming falls under the latter of these two ideas, but is just one piece of this decision-making process. Students need to learn how to verify their decisions, which includes both confirming and rejecting attempts in text. With specific teaching and prompting throughout the lesson series, teachers must establish and foster this essential decision-making process from the beginning.

Are You Right?
After the child tries a new word, we often ask the infamous question: “Are you right?” It’s a beautiful question, really. It puts the responsibility of checking on the child. It is great for economy of language. But how often have you uttered those words only to be met with a blank stare, a shrug, or an “I don’t know?” Or perhaps the child decides to use a slow-check to confirm and checks his attempt (The dog is on the bed) against the text (The dog is on the couch) only to incorrectly declare, “Yes! I’m right!”

If students do not know how to answer our prompt accurately, then we need to ask ourselves why this is happening. Where is our teaching going wrong? It is important to remember Clay’s (2005a) words that “a prompt is a call for action to do something within his control” (p. 39). Before we call on students to confirm independently, we must ask ourselves if we have really taught them how to know if they are right or wrong.

In order to understand what is involved in confirming or rejecting an attempt using letter and sound knowledge, we must consider what Clay (2005b) says the child has to coordinate in order to know if he is right or wrong:

1. Is the child aware of the visual form and its features?
2. Can the child hear the sounds in the spoken word?
3. Has the child linked these two things? (p. 119)

What does he know about letters and words? How is his phonemic awareness? And then, ultimately, has the child learned how to coordinate the two? Just because the child can identify that turtle starts with /t/, it does not automatically mean that he can link it to the letter t or that he can find that letter at the beginning of a word on a whole page of text.

“Are you right?” is really calling on students to hear sounds in words while looking at print (in the right direction) and then being able to make a decision. Yes, I can see the letters that match the sounds in that word. Or no, I do not see the letters I expected to see. Additionally, students must be able to make that decision while being aware of the...
Noticing the Presence or Absence of Effective Decision Making

Before we can address teaching how to improve decision making, we need to be able to identify if students already demonstrate confirming or rejecting behaviors while reading. Running records and other close observations of the reading process during the lesson can provide the teacher with the information needed to identify the presence or absence of effective decision making.

The following examples demonstrate effective confirming and rejecting behaviors, which can be observed when the student tries a new word but then takes another step to see if that attempt is right or wrong.

### Effective Confirming

**I’ll go and get a rabbit to eat.**

| I will | “no” | SC | ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓
|--------|------|----|----------------

**I will** is a good initial substitution for **I’ll** in this example of effective rejecting. The attempt is similar in meaning and structure, and shares many visual similarities. Does the child then show evidence of checking on himself? Absolutely. The child says “no,” recognizing that something is not quite right and then goes on to self-correct the error. Even without the final self-correction, we have evidence of effective decision making. The verbalization of “no” shows that he is able to reject the response even if he cannot come up with correct response.

Now let’s look at some examples that show ineffective decision making due to the lack of confirming and rejecting responses.

### Ineffective Confirming

**She took him for a ride.**

| I will | “no” | SC | ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓
|--------|------|----|----------------

In this example of effective decision making, the student makes a correct attempt, repeats the word and then checks slowly through the letters and sounds to see if it matches. The final repetition seems to confirm the child’s decision: “Yes, it is ride! I was right!” Even if the child had used the short vowel i in the slow-check, it would still be effective decision making. The student would have tried both ride and rid, only to reject rid as the correct response.

**They zoomed after the giant.**

| I will | “no” | SC | ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓
|--------|------|----|----------------

In this example the child has the correct response but then changes it. It is apparent that the child does not now how to confirm that his first response is, in fact, accurate.

**said the hungry little kitten.**

| I will | “no” | SC | ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓
|--------|------|----|----------------

At first glance, this example of ineffective confirming seems to show effective decision making. However, the notes in the margin provide important information about the student’s understanding at this time. The student makes the self-correction without looking at the print. Perhaps it is a lucky guess. Or maybe he remembers the correct word from yesterday. Or, maybe he thinks, “If I try them all, one of them is bound to be right!” The notes show that he has not made a final decision based on what looks right.

While the previous examples show the presence or absence of confirming behaviors, it is often difficult to isolate confirming from other strategic activities. When students demonstrate effective decision making, there are often overlaps with monitoring, cross-checking and searching for more information. It is nearly impossible to know exactly where one strategic activity ends and the next one begins.

Confirming is also difficult to observe because it is not always as overt, as the previous examples have shown — particularly as students begin to do the decision making underground, or in their heads. As the confirming behaviors are emerging, we can often hear students working through these decisions out loud. Careful observation provides us with valuable information about where they are in this process.

This is why it is important to record all attempts on the running record, regardless of how small they seem or how quietly they are uttered; we do not want to miss any evidence of these emerging decision-making behaviors.
Behaviors to Notice

Student behaviors
As we are working with students and making close observations about their reading behaviors, there are some student characteristics that may signal the absence of confirming and rejecting.

During the student’s attempt:
• Stopping (probably thinking: Is that right?)
• Appealing verbally (Am I right? Is it ___?)
• Appealing nonverbally (looking to the teacher for help)
• Changing a correct response
• Making multiple attempts (or wavering between two options)
• Using a questioning voice

After the student gives an incorrect response:
• “Oops!”
• “Not quite!”
• “So close!”
• “Hmmm”
• “That’s not…”

We may not even notice ourselves doing these things, especially nodding or smiling after a correct response. Although it is natural for us to praise and encourage the child, it may be better to delay the affirmation until after the child has had the chance to confirm or reject his attempt on his own.

In order to teach students to be effective decision makers, we must first observe students as they are reading throughout the entire lesson—familiar reading, the running record, and the new book—and pay close attention not only to their attempts at words, but to what they do after those attempts. Are they taking any initiative to see if they are right or wrong, as seen in the first two examples? Or do they seem completely oblivious to errors or how to confirm independently, like the student at the beginning of this article who was confident that he was right when he said bed for couch? Close observation and detailed records help the teacher notice when a student needs more explicit teaching to establish effective decision-making processes.

Teacher behaviors
It is not always the child’s fault that he has not yet developed effective decision-making processes. Sometimes we get so excited about the fact that he actually tried a word or that he got it right that we inadvertently “steal” the opportunity for the child to check on himself. Consider these teacher behaviors and language that may perpetuate the absence of confirming and rejecting behaviors.

After the student gives a correct response:
• “You’re right!”
• “Yes”!
• “Good for you!”
• “Mmm-hmmm”
• Nodding/smiling

We, as humans, need physical experiences; it is how our brains learn. In order to make this abstract confirming task more accessible and real for students, we may need to engage more of their senses initially. According to Zull, “The sense of touch can enrich learning” (2002, p. 151). This, along with vision and oral language can provide the child with the concrete experiences needed to build understanding about and help make sense of this abstract process of: “Am I right or am I wrong?”

The following suggestions may improve confirming behaviors by providing the student with concrete experiences that, although temporary, will help the child to build a better understanding of what it means to be right or to be wrong.
Establishing an effective slow-check

In order to make a decision about accuracy, a student needs an awareness of letter forms, of hearing sounds in words, and of how these two things are linked. This awareness does not mean that the child must know every letter and letter sound before being able to confirm. Students can be called upon to confirm or reject attempts using even just a handful of letters or sounds that they do know, but the teacher must know exactly which words would then be appropriate for the child to check.

The goal of a slow-check is to determine if what is said matches what is shown in print. It is “a fast visual scan” that eventually is done with just the eyes as readers become more proficient (Clay, 2005b, p. 13). For beginning readers, however, they often need their finger under the word to focus their attention as they say the word slowly and look carefully at the print.

Consider the following example, which shows what it looks like to use the slow-check effectively both to reject an incorrect response and to confirm a correct response.

Text: “Hello little kitten,” said a boy.

Anna: Hello, Hi, H-i, H-e-l-l-o. (sliding finger under the word Hello while saying each slowly) Hello little kitten…

Anna has two good options to check. Is it Hi or is it Hello? Independently, she first slow-checks to see if it is Hi. Rejecting that option, she then slow-checks her other option, Hello. She is able to confirm that it is correct. After this short slow-down to check on herself, she can continue on with the story.

Often, we assume that students know what we mean when we ask them to check if they are right but they do not quite understand the combined task of saying, hearing, looking, and matching. Perhaps they can say the word slowly but are not looking at or running their finger under the word in the text. Perhaps they can say the word and run their finger appropriately under it, but they do not notice that it does not match. Or perhaps they begin to look too closely at the print and try to sound out the word instead of saying the word slowly. Therefore, the first way to shift these ineffective behaviors is to teach the slow check. Take some time to demonstrate and to share the task with our beginning readers.

Here is an example of explicitly teaching the slow check through demonstration.

Text: I can color with my brown crayon.

Sarah: I can color with my blue crayon.

Teacher: Does that make sense with your story?

Sarah: (shakes her head)

Teacher: What would make sense?

Sarah: Brown

Teacher: See if that word looks like brown.

Sarah: I can color with my brown c-r-a-y-o-n (while her finger is under the word brown)

Teacher: Let’s check that word really closely to see if it’s brown (pointing to brown). Do the letters match?

Sarah: Yes.

Teacher: Yeah, /bl/ (pointing to the b). /rrrrrr/ (slides pencil left to right across the word, stopping above the r). I hear that /l/. brow/nnnnnnn/ (slides pencil left to right across the word, stopping above the n). I see that /nl/. It is brown.

Sarah: with my brown crayon

When asked to check the word brown, Sarah clearly has no idea what to do. She starts saying crayon slowly while looking at the word brown. The teacher interrupts the ineffective behavior and steps in with a demonstration of how the process works. While saying the word slowly, the teacher stops on sounds (letters) with which the child is familiar. The letter is not named, as that would take the child a step away from the task. Sarah needs to be supported in hearing the sounds and matching them to the correct symbol. The teacher purposely did not mention the /ow/ because it is beyond her learning at this time. Also notice that the teacher started sliding her finger from the beginning of the word each time, reinforcing that crucial left-to-right directionality.

It is important that as we are choosing which words to use for demonstrating the task, we think about what our students know. Pick words that contain letters and sounds that they already know so they can clearly see the link between sounds and symbols. Begin with sound-regular
words before addressing words with silent letters or complex spelling patterns. Knight or Georgie would not be appropriate first choices for modeling this task.

Be strict about where a student’s finger is under the word. As he says the word slowly, his finger should be pointing to the letter that matches. This will help students to focus and attend to the print more closely during the slow-check.

Through our explicit teaching and demonstrations, most students understand the purpose of the slow-check and that alone is sufficient to develop decision-making behaviors. Some students, however, despite our teaching of the process many different times on many different words, do not seem to understand how to confirm or reject a word based on that check. For such students, something more concrete may be needed. By tapping into other strengths and abilities that the child already has in other parts of the lesson, we can help to support him in this decision-making process. For example, we can bring in his knowledge of writing, through Elkonin boxes and saying words slowly, to help with checking the accuracy of his word attempts. We can use what he already knows in writing and show him how it works when reading.

**Connecting to Writing**

Although Clay (2005b) intended for Elkonin or sound boxes to be used in writing, they can also be a concrete way to remind students of what they already know about how letters and sounds work together. When introduced to this task in writing, students learn how to say words slowly, hearing the individual sounds in words and eventually learning to match a letter to that sound. The boxes act as a physical framework for an abstract task; it makes the task of hearing and recording sounds more tangible and understandable for our students.

Once students can use these sound boxes successfully in their writing, we can help the child transfer this knowledge to reading. Sound boxes can provide a physical framework for a child to decide if the word he said is or is not correct. It makes the abstract task of matching symbols to sounds more concrete. In the following example, the teacher helps the student to confirm his attempt using the concept of pushing up the sounds in a word like he does during writing.

**Text:** They kicked the ball up and down the park.

**Ryan:** They kicked the ball up and down the …

**Teacher:** Are you thinking where they are?

**Ryan:** (nods) up and down the park.

**Teacher:** Are you right?

**Ryan:** (looks up at the teacher without responding)

**Teacher:** (draws three boxes and writes in p-ar-k) Push up your sounds and see.

**Ryan:** (pushes up into each box with his finger) /p/ /ar/ /k/. Yup. Park.

**Teacher:** And that makes sense, they are in the park, right?

**Ryan:** Yeah.

When Ryan is unable to confirm his attempt independently, the teacher steps in quickly to provide a concrete connection to the Elkonin boxes he is already using successfully in writing. With the extra support in place, he is able to confirm for himself what he could not yet do alone; it is park.

Making explicit connections to sound boxes helps the child to attend, left to right, letter by letter, through a word as he is learning to look at and use print in the earlier text levels. Once a student begins to understand how to confirm or reject an attempt by relating it to sound boxes, the teacher can call on him to transfer this knowledge back to the slow-check. She can prompt the child to “check the word as if it is in boxes,” or ask, “Is that how that word would look in boxes?” By linking it to Elkonin boxes, the slow-check process becomes less abstract.

As lessons progress, or as mid-year students enter Reading Recovery, you may see some strengths emerge in writing. Some children have a lot of knowledge about writing but do not understand how letters and sounds work in reading. They have not yet learned the reciprocity of reading and writing, and they do not automatically understand that the knowledge and processes they use for one can also be used for the other. Lyons, Pinnell, and DeFord (2003, as cited in Fried, 2006, p. 5) remind teachers that we need to dig ditches between these two pools of knowledge by showing the child the connection between what he already knows in writing and how it can help him to make decisions in reading. Physically writing words, or parts of words, or letters also provides that sensory
experience which helps build up
the abstract process of confirming
a response.

Writing helps the student in the
following example decide between
two options.

Text: “Good boy, Jonathan,”
said the clown with
the bike.

John: Good boy, Jonathan,
said the clown with
the balloons.

Teacher: Something didn’t
look right.

John: (puts his finger in
to point) Good boy,
Jonathan, said the
clown with the bal-
loon. (looks up at the
teacher)

Teacher: Are you right?

John: Yeah. Bike!

Teacher: Which one is it?

John: I don’t know.
(attempts to slow-check
but just mumbles b
and l sounds)

Teacher: (pulling out a white-
board) So if you were
going to write bike,
what would it look
like? (turns the book
over) Say it while you
write it.

John: (says bike slowly and
writes B-i-k-e)

Teacher: Let’s see if that’s what
bike looks like in the
story.

John and Teacher reread the
sentence and then compare bike
on the whiteboard to the word in
the book.

Teacher: They look the same,
don’t they? You
were right.

John begins with the attempt bal-
loons, which fits the story and
begins with a b. Yet when asked if
he is right, he quickly changes his
response to bike. Was it just a lucky
guess? Has he really confirmed that
it is bike and not balloon, or does he
just assume that since the teacher
is asking about it, that it must be
wrong? When the teacher asks which
it is, John plainly states “I don’t
know.” It is obvious that he needs
something more to help him decide
which is correct so the teacher taps
into his writing strength to help him
confirm. John can say and write bike
easily, which is then matched to the
print. He can finally decide that it
is bike.

As the child becomes more successful
in confirming or rejecting an attempt
by relating it to writing, the teacher
can then link it back to the slow-
check. He can then be prompted to
“check that word as if you were going
to write it.” Or, “Is that how it would
look if you were to write it?”

For students who are having a
difficult time making decisions about
words in text, more explicit teaching
of the process is needed before we
can prompt, “Are you right?” Demo-
strating the slow-check process
and providing the child with the
concrete experiences of Elkonin
boxes and writing may help him to
better understand the abstract task of
confirming or rejecting.
Lifting the Scaffold
Helping students to better understand the slow-check by linking it to knowledge about Elkonin boxes or writing is a very supportive way to build decision making in our beginning readers. Following Clay’s (2005b) advice, all interactions should be concise and to the point, using examples that are clear, easy, and memorable. It is important that we gradually bring that concrete experience closer and closer to the text, since the goal is for students to be able to confirm or reject while reading in continuous text, not in isolation.

In order to build independence, it is important to remember to lift our scaffold so that children can take on more responsibility. In relation to Clay’s scale of help (2005b, p. 132), the teaching examples discussed in this article have been the most supportive. The words were pulled out of the text in order to create a more concrete experience for the child to learn how to confirm or reject a response in a grand manner.

A natural progression is for the teacher to shift from lifting the examples out of the text to exploring them while embedded in text. By making reference to the concrete experience, the teacher can remind the child that he knows how to do this and is now expected to apply that knowledge directly to his text reading. Prompts such as, “Check the word as if it is in boxes” or “Say it like you are going to write it” call for students to remember the concrete experience their brain has stored so that they can turn it into action on this new experience.

Finally, once we have established this strong foundation and students become more successful with the task both on the concrete level and then when supported in text, we can move to the more abstract prompt we are so eager to use: “Are you right?” This gradual release of responsibility is key to building independent decision making in our students.

References

About the Author
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