Uncovering What’s Under the White Tape: Reflecting on a Child’s Approximations Over Time

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Editor’s note: All children’s names are pseudonyms.

Alexander was perplexed. He stared down at the $t$ in his writing book. A few minutes earlier he had decided to caption the climactic picture in *Where are the Sunhats?* (Randell, 1994) with the sentences *Look Dad! I found your hat.* When Alexander was ready to write the word *found* he said the word slowly, isolated the /f/ and wrote what appeared to be a $t$ (see Figure 1).

Noticing Alexander’s perplexed look, his teacher, Jim, asked, “What’s the matter?”

“That’s not an $f$,” he announced.

Jim said, “Good for you! Do you know how to write an $f$?”

Alexander shook his head, “No.”

Jim reached for the lowercase letter $f$ from a set of magnetic letters and placed it on the work page of Alexander’s writing book. “Here’s the letter you need.” Jim immediately grabbed the white tape dispenser, tore off a small piece and covered up the $t$.

“Oh yeah!” Alexander quickly wrote a lowercase $f$ on top of the white tape.

Any teacher conducting the writing portion of a Reading Recovery lesson recognizes this scenario. The child monitors a mistake while writing his story; the teacher covers up the error with white tape and immediately teaches, demonstrates, or prompts for the correct response. The Reading Recovery teacher has at his disposal at least one roll of white tape that is standard issue, right beside other instructional materials such as magnetic letters and sentence strips. In any school year, it would not be hyperbole to suggest that miles of white tape are consumed as Reading Recovery teachers around the world scaffold children’s successful responding with all that they must coordinate as they write their daily, little stories or messages.

The incidence of white tape can become a source of reflection for the Reading Recovery teacher, and by uncovering what is under the white tape the teacher resolves to better understand a child’s emerging control and to anticipate the child’s responses for later lessons.
Clay clarifies why the Reading Recovery teacher uses white tape:

Allow the child to stop when he recognizes that something has gone wrong. That acknowledges his self-monitoring. If the child is too quick for you and the error is already on the page, mask the error some way. (2016, p. 84)

But it’s not enough to simply allow white tape’s use, because earlier in that same section of Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals, Clay challenges the teacher to “anticipate a child’s difficulty and offer help before errors occur” (2016, p. 84). This is a tall order, one that we struggle with in our own teaching, even as we continually seek to understand what the child controls and what we think the child will have difficulty with at the sentence, word, and within-word levels. The incidence of white tape can become a source of reflection for the Reading Recovery teacher, and by uncovering what is under the white tape the teacher resolves to better understand a child’s emerging control and to anticipate the child’s responses for later lessons.

In order to take up Clay’s challenge to anticipate a child’s errors while seeking to understand his ever-increasing control over his writing we will emphasize the following themes in this article:

- An error is an approximation that provides information as to what the child is paying attention to, and any error patterns signal the teacher how her teaching must change.
- The incidence of white tape in a child’s daily story can act as a measure of how in sync the teacher and child are, wherein the child successfully writes within his emerging level of control with his observant teacher providing that which he does not control.

Grounding Our Practice in Clay’s Position on Writing

The writing of a little story or message occupies the middle segment in a daily, 30-minute lesson. Writing follows the rereading of familiar books, including the second reading of yesterday’s new book and approximately 2 minutes of letter work. Story writing also occurs before the lesson’s new book is introduced by the teacher and read by the child with teacher assistance. Writing’s placement in the daily lesson is deliberate, as Clay argued that writing “prevents learners from neglecting or overlooking many things they must know about print, and reveals things about the learner’s way of working that their teachers need to know about” (2001, p. 18) in a slowed down process (1982).

Figure 1 illustrates an example of all that Alexander was trying to orchestrate on his writing page and work page when writing two simple sentences, including

- Honoring serial order within the sentence and within words,
- Using spacing,
- Choosing punctuation,
- Writing known words,
- Learning new words,
- Monitoring sound-to-letter relationships,
- Organizing sounds heard in words to be written, and
- Forming letters and aligning them one next to the other.

Writing therefore becomes a powerful venue for exploring aspects of print that the child used or overlooked during familiar reading while simultaneously priming him to orchestrate similar print demands when he has the chance to read his new book. Writing is a mirror process to reading, with reciprocal gains afforded the child who begins to use in his reading what he is monitoring when writing. (Doyle, 2013). In fact, the reciprocal gains from writing are immediately practiced when the child reads and rereads the emerging story he is cowriting with his teacher. Thus, white tape becomes a necessity so that the child has a predominantly conventional piece to read.

Critics of the writing portion of the Reading Recovery lesson suggest that the teacher is focused on accuracy when white tape is used and that a child’s writing errors do not have to be covered up in order to be read. They believe this practice will discourage the child from attempting to increasingly control and orchestrate the many levels of print demanded of him. We remind such critics that any story page in a daily lesson has an accompanying work page, where a child’s attempts and trials can be explored with the teacher in a risk-free environment and that Clay (2016) says our focus should be anticipating a child’s emerging control—preventing errors from getting on the story page—but errors will inevitably be made. And if errors are made, the child’s reading and rereading those errors serves no accelerative, reciprocal purpose.

The Reading Recovery teacher values the attempts on the child’s work page and any errors on the story page as evidence of what he might be pay-
Teaching attention to as well as what needs to come under more-sophisticated control. A Reading Recovery teacher does not consider a child’s attempt as wrong, but as an approximation that reveals an intentional move (Siegler, 2000) that becomes a springboard upon which to build. For example, when Alexander wrote what appeared to be a *t* for an *f*, Jim realized that Alexander not only self-monitored he hadn’t written an *f* but that his attempt was very close to the look of an *f*. Valuing approximations has a long history in the early literacy research and practice with emergent spelling (Gillet, Temple, Temple, & Crawford, 2012; Read, 1986) and emergent writing (Clay, 1975; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Graves, 1994; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). The Reading Recovery teacher honors what is right about the attempt while reflecting on how to build her instructional scaffold so that the child’s subsequent attempts will become increasingly sophisticated.

A child’s approximations over a few lessons also become a valued source for identifying patterns of strengths and needs. For example, Jim noticed similar types of letter formation approximations beyond the *t for f* in Figure 1 such as Alexander’s backward capital *D* in the end position of *found* that followed an accurately formed *d* at the end of *Dad*, as well as a flowing *t in hat*. Clay (2001) maintains that “the challenge for teachers is to understand what is going on before their eyes, as reading and writing come together to influence each other,” (p. 12) and that “often the child’s attention is not where the teacher expects it to be” (p. 19). When a teacher peels back the white tape on the recently written story page or analyzes approximations made on the work pages, she is taking up Clay’s challenge to understand in order to respond appropriately with what the child needs at that point. And respond the teacher must, either immediately or in the short-term. It is not enough to simply analyze approximations but to respond to the child with what Clay (2001) called,

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**Figure 1. Alexander’s Story and Work Pages — Lesson 22**

![Figure 1](image)

The top section is Alexander’s story page. A rectangular box indicates the presence of white tape over an approximation. The bottom left quadrant replicates Jim’s lesson notes. Boxed words indicate that these words were jointly analyzed in Elkonin boxes on the work page. Underlined words or punctuation were independently written. Circled items indicate that Alexander isolated the appropriate sound but was unsure of how to write the corresponding letter. Numbers indicate the order in which Alexander heard the sounds he wanted to write. The bottom right quadrant is a facsimile of Alexander’s work page used in conjunction with his story.
“astutely delivered teaching with a target that involves learning how to do something, do it better, do it faster, link it up to something, and prepare it for future independent use” (p. 31). Using case studies from our own teaching of children at various points in their lesson series as well as teacher leader field observations of Reading Recovery teachers, the remaining sections of this article document what we found when we peeled back the white tape on the story page and reviewed the approximations on the work page. We then illustrate our teaching responses.

**Beginning to Look at Print During Early Learning**

Sarah and Leslie began working together in the fall. From the start, Leslie noticed Sarah’s strong ability to maintain an introduced language pattern and an engaging willingness to work hard. Scoring in Stanine 1 on four of the tasks of *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2013), Sarah’s knowledge of print was very limited, but she was ready and eager to learn more (see Table 1).

Sarah wrote very little during the administration of the Observation Survey Writing Vocabulary task and Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words task, so Leslie had to scrutinize what was available and link Sarah’s correct responses as well as her approximations with her performance on all the other tasks. Leslie observed that Sarah viewed reading and writing as meaning-making activities. Sarah monitored with a known word, wrote her first and last name, and isolated and recorded a few sounds. Taken together, Sarah’s Observation Survey responses described a student just beginning to attend to print, with emerging evidence of attending to known words in books.

After completing the Observation Survey Summary of Sarah’s useful and problem strategic activity, Leslie tackled writing the predictions of progress (Clay, 2016). In *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals*, Clay asks the teacher to consider what the child can do that is useful and to pay attention to problematic areas as well (p. 28). Leslie concluded that she must focus Sarah’s attention on learning to look at print while intensifying her teaching of letters and words so that Sarah would increasingly integrate visual information with the meaning and structure she already used when reading. Leslie recognized her initial teaching needed to be balanced between teaching for items and supporting Sarah’s strategic problem solving, as Leslie was concerned that she may be very tempted to focus too much on items for their own sake.

While crafting predictions of progress for Sarah, Leslie followed Clay’s directive to “put [her] current limitations and what [she] finds difficult into an account of the path you think [she] might need to take” (2005a, p. 31). For example, Sarah was able to isolate a few sounds in words by saying them slowly, yet she could not represent those sounds with the corresponding letters. During Roaming Around the Known, Leslie valued Sarah’s contributions by encouraging her to say a word slowly and quickly supplying the corresponding letter for her. By sharing the task of writing many times in each Roaming Around the Known lesson, Sarah’s approximations became more and more refined.

Sarah wanted to write a book about her family, so she and Leslie began with pictures and the repeated pattern, *This is my mom, [Mom’s first and last name]. This is my dad, [Dad’s first and last name] and so on. The last name was the only known word that Sarah wrote independently and she increased her fluency with this word each time she wrote it. The instructional reconstruction, below, illustrates how Leslie scaffolded Sarah’s increasing control over analyzing and recording the first sound in *my* and subsequently writing the word, itself:

| L: (writes *This is* for Sarah in her story) |
| L: Say *my* slowly. |
| S: *mmmmmmiiiiii* |
| L: That’s an *M* you’re saying, Let me show you what it looks like. (writes a lowercase *m* on the white board) |
| S: I want to write it! (writes *m* with a very long stick in the place where it needed to go in her story) |

**Table 1. Sarah’s Observation Survey Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LI</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OWT</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WV</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRSIW</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRL</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LI</th>
<th>Letter Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OWT</td>
<td>Ohio Word Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>Concepts About Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WV</td>
<td>Word Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRSIW</td>
<td>Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRL</td>
<td>Text Reading Level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During Roaming Around the Known, Leslie valued Sarah’s contributions by encouraging her to say a word slowly and quickly supplying the corresponding letter for her. By sharing the task of writing many times in each Roaming Around the Known lesson, Sarah’s approximations became more and more refined.

L: That’s good! You wrote an m. (quickly takes some white tape and covers the top of the stick without comment and finishes the word and the sentence, allowing Sarah to write her family’s last name)

L: (writes This is, again, on a new page in Sarah’s story). Read to see what you want to say next.

S: (reads) This is....MY! I need to write my!

L: Would you like to see it?

S: Yes! (Leslie shows her the word on a previous page.)

S: Now cover it up! I don’t want to look! (Leslie covered the word and Sarah writes my with an appropriately sized stick and does so from then on.)

L: Your writing is easy to read and that word says my. What word do we need next? Let’s read and find out.

This was the first time the white tape made an appearance in Sarah’s lesson series. Interestingly, Sarah identified neither M nor m on the Letter Identification task from Clay’s Observation Survey, but she was able to isolate the initial sound in the word my and her first attempt at production had most of the features that make up a lowercase m, i.e., a stick and two humps. The use of the white tape seemed to silently focus Sarah’s attention on the size of the initial stick without the risky, overt teaching we should avoid during Roaming Around the Known. Instead of Leslie writing the m each time it occurred, Leslie’s use of the white tape seemed to focus Sarah on an aspect of the formation she needed to monitor the next time she independently wrote that letter.

By the end of Roaming Around the Known, Sarah had learned seven additional letter names and five words, effectively tripling her writing vocabulary. How did this happen? There are four possible explanations:

1. Telling and showing constituted effective teacher modeling.
2. Telling and showing fostered Sarah’s independence.
3. Sharing the task increased Sarah’s independent performance over time.
4. Connecting letter sounds to letter forms proved not to be that difficult for Sarah.

Given Sarah’s substantial progress during Roaming Around the Known, Leslie updated the predictions of progress for what Sarah needed to learn next and why. In writing, Leslie set three short term goals:

(a) learning and forming letters,
(b) establishing the task of hearing and recording sounds in words, and
(c) accumulating a writing vocabulary. She drew these goals from Sarah’s Roaming Around the Known performance as well as from chapter 2 “Changes teachers might observe during lessons” in Clay’s Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals where she states:

The child learns to compose a message to be written. The child works on directional and spatial rules, learns to form letters, learns to hear the phonemes in words, monitors all aspects of the task and begins to build a writing vocabulary. (2016, p. 46)

In Sarah’s first lessons out of Roaming Around the Known, the work pages in the writing book and the use of white tape on the message page chronicled the focus of instruction. Peeking under the white tape uncovered Sarah’s approximations and the times Leslie did not catch the lapses before they occurred. Letter formation issues accounted for much of the white tape, and because another goal was to build Sarah’s writing vocabulary, Sarah’s initial approximations and increasing control of words were on full display.

Lessons 14 and 15 illustrated this cycle of increasingly sophisticated approximations and the work that still needed to be done (see Figures 2 and 3). Sarah’s expertise with horses led to many stories about her favorite animal, as seen in both these messages. The word can occurred in Sarah’s reading but this is the first time
the word came up in writing. Leslie asked her if she could write the word \textit{can} since she had read it or if she needed to see it in one of her books. Sarah produced \textit{cad}. Leslie responded, “You’re nearly right!” and covered the \textit{d} with white tape. “This is what it looks like,” Leslie said and wrote \textit{can} on the work page. Sarah wrote it twice on the work page and then said she was ready to put it on the message page. Figure 2 shows what she worked on (circled) with Leslie and what she initiated independently (underlined). Spacing, a few known words, and dominant sounds were all signs of progress. Sarah was taking on lots of new learning quickly.

Lesson 15 told a different story (see Figure 3). Now Sarah was responsible for hearing and recording sounds in words using Elkonin boxes (Clay, 2016), writing several known words, attending to spacing, maintaining the message, and writing letters efficiently and legibly. It proved too much for her. For example, Sarah’s work page in Figure 3 illustrates that Sarah needed to shore up \textit{can} as a known word, sort out the difference between a \textit{v} and \textit{u} when writing \textit{up}, and choose the lowercase \textit{f} needed during the sound analysis for \textit{lift}. Clay (2005b) described this difficulty as the “pebble in the pond” effect when she wrote:

There will be fluctuations in performance. We are constantly urging the child to lift his performance and add new knowledge. This will challenge some old knowledge….This weakens the system temporarily until it strengthens again at a higher level of complexity. (p. 63)

In just 14 lessons, though, Sarah learned how to write several new words in every detail as well as how to solve a word using a sound analysis. She attended to letter formation and was able to record her message in a way that was easy to read. Leslie had to take all of these demands into account as she planned for the next few days of teaching. How could she value the good work that Sarah was doing and allow time for the consolidation of newer learning?

One of the procedures Leslie needed to employ with more regularity was...
“to write known words faster” (Clay, 2016, p. 89). Just because Sarah demonstrated that she could write can and horse in Lesson 14 did not mean that Leslie should expect that those words would be quickly written in Lesson 15. In fact, the white tape used in Lesson 15 revealed that horse was not under the same level of independent control as it had been in Lesson 14. At this point in Sarah’s lesson series, recent words such as can and horse fall on Clay’s (2016) scale of knowing as either “successfully problem-solved” or “easily produced but easily thrown” (p. 75). Clay maintained that the teacher should create opportunities on the work page for the child to practice words coming under more independent control. In Sarah’s case, can needed to be written multiple times on Lesson 15’s work page while horse needed to be trialed only once before these recent words were written quickly and independently. It is this repeated action that moves a child from helpful approximations to correct responding with little attention. The focus on getting known words under fast, independent control paid a dividend by Lesson 16 when Sarah wrote, *I like brushing my horse’s tail. My horse’s tail is pretty.* Sarah wrote horse correctly each time and was free to give her attention to other aspects of the writing task. Leslie learned a valuable lesson as well, i.e., preparing for overlearning has a big payoff as a springboard to better independent performance while consolidating new learning.

Mid-Program Writing

Maria was a quiet first grader with a shy smile who always seemed eager to come to her Reading Recovery lesson. An English learner who had started at the school in kindergarten, she was being considered for special education testing when Jim picked her up for Reading Recovery service. It was around Lesson 27 when Jim realized that something was not quite right when it came to Maria’s writing progress, but he could not put his finger on it.

Maria’s Observation Survey scores were higher than his other students’ at point of entrance, and at Lesson 27, Maria was already instructionally reading at Levels 8–9. Jim was encouraged at the level of indepen-

Figure 3. Sarah’s Story and Work Pages — Lesson 15

The top section is Sarah’s story page. A rectangular box indicates the presence of white tape over an approximation. The bottom left quadrant replicates Leslie’s lesson notes. Boxed words indicate that these words were jointly analyzed in Elkonin boxes on the work page. Underlined words were independently written. Circled items indicate that Sarah and Leslie jointly wrote the word. Numbers indicate the order in which Sarah heard the sounds she wanted to write. The bottom right quadrant is a facsimile of Sarah’s work page used in conjunction with her story.
dence she exhibited daily when reading as well.

When Jim reviewed her writing samples and the accompanying lesson records over the previous five lessons, he saw a similar level of independence in Maria’s writing:

• She heard and recorded most consonants and many vowels in left-to-right sequence. This was expected progress, as Maria entered Reading Recovery with a score of 29 out of a possible 37 on the Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words task of the Observation Survey. Jim realized in his reflection, though, that the continual use of sound boxes was quite easy for Maria and he should be using letter boxes on the work page at this point.

• She was regularly learning new words. (See Table 2 for Maria’s progress with word learning at this point in her lesson series.)

• Letter formation was fluent and letters were appropriately sized.

• She consistently spaced between her words and ended her sentences with periods.

• After a small bit of conversation around a personal experience, Maria was able to orally produce a short sentence or two that could be written.

From Lessons 22–26, Jim had only used three pieces of white tape, and when peeling back two of those pieces of white tape, he saw a pattern that he checked out over her previous writing samples. Maria sometimes switched out an uppercase letter with a lowercase equivalent, or vice versa. For example, in Lesson 24, Maria independently wrote HAPPY instead of happy or when prompted which word should start her sentence in Lesson 25, she or she, Maria chose the latter. Jim knew that in future lessons, he would be more deliberate when prompting her to think about which letter case she should use. This seemed an easy-enough, short-term teaching goal.

It was almost a point of honor with Jim that this lack of white tape meant he was anticipating possible errors before Maria could make them. For example, in Lesson 22, Maria paused after the i when writing the word with. Jim said, “Do you know the two letters that end with? I’ll show you.” Then Jim directed Maria to write with three times on her work page.

Something about her writing progress was still niggling Jim. He turned to Clay’s (2016) “Changes teachers might observe during lessons” in Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals (p. 44). He compared these broad observations to Maria’s writing progress and determined that she was well into Stage II of those descriptors. When Jim read, “The messages composed are more complex and varied,” (p. 46) for Stage III, it spurred him to review the syntactic complexity of Maria’s daily writing.

• She tended to write one or two short, simple sentences. (See Table 3 for examples.)

• Over the last five lessons, her little stories comprised, on average, five words.

• On average she quickly and independently wrote 65% of the needed words.

• The remaining words written were analyzed for sounds in a left-to-right order and recorded with the appropriate letters, with very little support provided by Jim.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Maria’s Writing Vocabulary – Mid-Learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>down</td>
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<tr>
<td>fell</td>
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<tr>
<td>saw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bus</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Maria’s Stories – Mid-Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 24 She was happy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 25 I fell down. I ride fast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 26 I crash and cry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Maria’s Stories After Jim’s Shift in Teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 28 The bus was loud because the bus driver open the door.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 29 The turtle said, “Stand up!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 30 The net will fall down. He said, “Help!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 31 The mouse help the lion, and she eat the net.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 32 The lion get out. The lion is happy. “So am I,” said the mouse.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Most of her stories were about personal experiences.

• Maria’s accumulated writing vocabulary was mainly comprised of short, single-syllable words that tended to be sound regular.

Jim realized to his mounting dismay that the very lack of white tape and approximations on the work page, when combined with a review of his lesson record notations were signaling the answer to Maria’s lack of writing progress. And the responsibility for this lack of progress rested with Jim.

Writing at this point in Maria’s program was too easy for her, and Jim had to decide how to raise the challenge. The answer lay in giving Maria a chance to write about the books she was successfully reading — books that used different, more complex syntactic structures that she did not necessarily use in her emerging English constructions surrounding a recent, personal experience. As an English learner, Maria was orally producing, at most, five or six words in a single utterance, and those words she said tended to be words she could now write. But if the conversation that started off the writing portion of the daily lesson centered on the books she was successfully reading, might the syntactic complexity of the writing start to change? Jim decided to find out by asking Maria in subsequent lessons to show him her favorite page of her running record book and then tell him about that page. Table 4 documents the improved results. Though the number of words in any sentence remained few, the quantity of talk dramatically increased and Jim noticed the following:

• Multisyllable words were increasingly available for sound analysis and orthography study within letter boxes, e.g., turtle, lion.

• Conventions such as quotation marks and dialogue writing were jointly analyzed.

• High-frequency words such as said were added to her writing vocabulary.

Figure 4 illustrates the shift in challenge Maria was taking on when Jim simply asked her to tell him about her favorite page in the books she was reading. Jim noted that not only was she able to transition easily to letter boxes, but that he was getting more

The top section is Maria’s story page. A rectangular box indicates the presence of white tape over an approximation. The bottom left quadrant replicates Jim’s lesson notes. Boxed words indicate that these words were jointly analyzed in letter boxes on the work page. Underlined words were independently written. Numbers indicate the order in which Maria heard the sounds she wanted to write. The bottom right quadrant is a facsimile of Maria’s work page used in conjunction with her story.
opportunities to show Maria how words worked. For example, after Maria took *mouse* to fluency on her work page, Jim prompted her to write *house*, analyzing how that new word looked and sounded like *mouse*.

Jim also resolved to let Maria try out an attempt on the work page and not simply jump in to provide the part she was unsure of. He thought back to Lesson 22 when she partially wrote *with* and how he had quickly provided the ending, assuming that part was too hard for her when he should have simply asked her to write *with* on the work page in order to determine what she could do.

Maria taught Jim that the lack of white tape and approximations on the work page might signal that the writing is too easy and that opportunities must be scaffolded for richer conversation that could be written down. Jim found that for Maria, conversation around a favorite book provided the requisite richness in her program, and that the primitiveness of her writing was as Clay (1998) says, “transformed as new concepts are learned and new pieces of information are added to the design in a kind of kaleidoscopic reshuffle” (p. 141).

**Moving Into Later Learning**

When Cheri, the teacher leader, started to explore the relationship of white tape and late learning, she went to one of her Reading Recovery teachers, and asked to observe and videotape a child who was moving quickly toward the end of her lesson series. Jane was highly effective and a typical Reading Recovery teacher; she was a life-long learner and eager to help in this mini-study. Jane selected her student Emma for the in-depth look at writing. From a quick glance at Emma’s writing book it was obvious that there was an absence of white tape near the end of her lesson series. So why was this? Cheri speculated on many possibilities. Was the lack of white tape because Emma had started to become more self-regulated in monitoring her message and problem solving words on the run? Did she keep the meaning of the message in mind as she wrote so that she had the correct, subsequent word or verb tense in her mind before the pencil hit the paper? In word solving, did she have a sense of knowing what she knew and knowing when she needed to give special attention to solving a word (i.e., Did she quickly and independently go to the work page if needed)? In short, had Emma learned to be self-regulated and in control of the complex acts involved in writing?

Cheri also speculated, as Jim did in his analysis of Maria’s writing, that there was not enough complexity in Emma’s writing; therefore, her performance was all in her actual zone of development (Vygotsky, 1978) and required no new learning. Which of the speculations was the answer? Cheri started the process of making sense of the child’s responses under the white tape and on the work page.

When Cheri looked at Emma’s classroom writing samples for December and early January, she saw many of the signposts of progress. Emma exhibited a “voice” in her writing and wrote for an audience. For example, her classroom story about Thanksgiving was complete with grandfather’s joke-telling and eating pumpkin pie for breakfast. Another piece of writing was a cumulative daily journal of “elf sightings in the classroom” along with her reactions. Her messages had indeed become longer with more-complex structures, such as the use of adverbial phrases and complex vocabulary. Clay (2016) identified as expectations for late learning (p. 46). We would expect that the child would create longer, more complex and interesting messages and compose on the run. We would also expect the child to be active and constructive, writing more, writing more fluently, and attempting new words independently using a sound analysis with an increase use of common spelling patterns. She would also self-monitor her writing more.

Emma’s stories in Reading Recovery were similar to the classroom writing.
She often wrote stories with a beginning, middle, and end and used different styles of writing, including directions for completing a task and persuasive writing about what makes a snow day great (see Figure 5). She had fluent control over the practical aspects of story writing and was increasing the complexity of her writing. So Cheri ruled out the notion that the writing had been too simple.

Viewing the video clip confirmed this fact and gave more information about Emma. During the sentence writing,  

My mom is a visitor at the school.  
She is going to do the fingerprints,  

Emma monitored the composing on the run and used capitalization and punctuation correctly. But more importantly, a pattern of teacher and student behaviors became visible. Jane always allowed the child the opportunity to initiate problem-solving attempts and if Emma hesitated as her marker was at the work page, Jane directed her with the quick and simple question, “What do you know about that word?” That’s all it took for Emma to get to work. But most of the time the teacher never interacted with word solving until after Emma initiated an attempt on the work page and had time to confirm or reject her try. The teacher always praised for approximations and allowed Emma to feel in control. This pattern of teaching/learning interactions had fostered independence and accelerated learning.

Jane also prompted a variety of ways to problem solve when she responded to Emma’s attempts. For example, she provided letter boxes when Emma wrote *figr* for *finger* or asked Emma to clap the parts for *visitor*. Jane even asked Emma to “Think about how that word looks in books” when Emma wrote *daw* for *do*.

To see more examples of writing and to help determine what might be Jane’s next step for instructing Emma, Cheri looked at two writing book entries done two weeks after the videotaping and analyzed the work pages of those samples. Table 5 and Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the word-solving actions Emma used during these two lessons. Emma wrote her known words quickly while learning new, high-interest and high-frequency words such as *angel*, *your*, and *put*.

There were several ways that Emma worked with words that showed signs of self-regulatory behavior. When she was unsure of a word, Emma quickly tried it on the work page and con-

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**Figure 5. Emma’s Story and Work Pages for Why a Snow Day is Great**

| 1. Have a snowball fight   | Snowball, angel |
| 2. Build a snowman         | Build, make, fit |
| 3. Make a snow angel       | Build, hide, and fight |
| 4. Drink hot cocoa         | Drink, hide, see |
| 5. Watch movies            | Drink, see |
| 6. Play hide and seek in the house | Drink, see |

This story was written over 2 days. The top section is Emma’s finished story. Jane did not have to use white tape. The bottom two quadrants are facsimiles of the work pages used during the story writing. Note Emma’s close approximations for words such as *seek*, *movies*, *build*, and *fight*. 
firmed or rejected it. Therefore there was no need for white tape on the story page.

There were also multiple attempts at words on the work page, e.g., drink, pool, hook, and water. The process of getting to hook was especially interesting (Figure 6) because she used a sound analysis and a visual analysis before utilizing word analogy with the known word look.

Sometimes, Jane provided more direct support. For example, during the attempt to write drink, Emma wrote Drinc (Figure 6). Jane responded by writing two alternatives on the work page: drinck and drink. Emma chose the correct spelling. This was an effective interaction because Emma, who usually made multiple attempts at words and was developing good visual memory of words, had only made one attempt here. It also reinforced the value of making multiple attempts.

As Reading Recovery teachers and teacher leaders, we regularly reflect on our teaching and ways to improve it. As the teacher leader, Cheri took a good look at the times the teacher had to tell Emma how the word looked. These types of teacher tolds are summarized in Table 5, and Cheri analyzed them to see if there were sound rationales for this type of teacher demonstrations or if there might have been alternative teaching moves that could keep Emma as independent as possible. The teacher’s decision to give Emma the word your and have her learn it, after Emma had written yoar was a helpful teacher told. It was a high-frequency word that Emma needed to know.

Other teacher tolds, such as watch for wach and movies for mu/mooves were also helpful teacher demonstrations since these words had what Clay (2016) refers to as “unusual features of letter-sound relationships” (p. 103). But there was something nagging Cheri about some of the other words the teacher wrote for Emma after her initial attempt: fit/fight, bot/boat, first/first, wrms/worms.

Emma solved most of these words using a sound analysis. In late learning, though, teachers expect children to use more word analogies and more

Figure 6. Emma’s Story and Work Pages for How to Catch a Fish

This story was written over a few days. The top left quadrant is Emma’s story page. Jane did not have to use white tape. The remaining three quadrants are facsimiles of the work pages used during the story writing. Note Emma’s close approximations for words such as first, next, pool, your, and worms. In the lower left quadrant, note how Emma used multiple invented spellings to attempt hook but ultimately used word analogy (look) in order to successfully produce it.
orthographic information in addition to sound analysis. The child has accumulated a rich inventory of known writing and reading vocabulary that are springboards for links to new, similar words that he wants to write. Clay (2016) says, “He now has to think about sounds (phonology) but he also has to think about spelling (orthography) — and he learns to juggle these two things” (p. 100). Perhaps if Jane had prompted, “Do you know a word that sounds like boat?” Emma might have responded with coat. And this same prompt might have helped link night with fight. In addition, letter boxes would give Emma a cognitive framework to think about the way the word looked, not just the way it sounded. For example, Cheri expected Emma to know that there should be a vowel in words when she wrote first but perhaps it might have been more helpful for Emma to think about the visual spelling pattern for the murmur diphthong in first. Using letter boxes, she might have tried first, or first, or even, first.

Cheri concluded that the scaffold of letter boxes would help Emma think more about visual aspects in many of her approximations. When looking through Emma’s journal, it became apparent that Jane had only provided letter boxes over a 2- to 3-week period with limited opportunities to use them to analyze words at this point in Emma’s program. So while Emma was making great progress, using letter boxes with more words or prompting more often for analogies would have helped Emma to attend more to spelling patterns. These types of teacher support would be generative in Emma’s future word solving.

Cheri learned much from the careful observation of Emma and her teacher, Jane, during the writing component and through the close analysis of writing samples and the work page. She saw that evidence of self-regulatory behavior during late learning can replace the need for white tape. She also discovered that there are certain teaching and learning behaviors that especially supported independence and accelerated learning in writing. Cheri learned there is great value in establishing a pattern of teacher/student interactions where the teacher allows the child to initiate attempts for words on the work page; that this allows the child to self-confirm or reject as part of word solving. This process of active child initiation and confirming does not just magically happen because it is late learning. The teacher has to prepare the ground carefully for this type of independence. She has to value, demonstrate, and scaffold flexible problem solving while accepting and praising approximations, all while removing herself as much as possible from over-managing the task (Ballantyne, 2014). And, of course, the teacher has to value and provide opportunities for the composition of longer, more complex stories written in a variety of genres. Making this a seamless transition from middle to late learning takes focused observation, reflection, and intentional teaching.

Final Thoughts

Over time, a Reading Recovery child’s emergent approximations in writing become increasingly sophisticated. In this article, we have attempted to demonstrate how her approximations provide insights as to what she controls, and that her teacher must be looking for patterns of control in her errors under the white tape and on the work page. As Clay (2016) maintains:

> When children are novice readers their cognitive processes used for reading [and writing] are being formed, undergoing changes from less expert to more expert...Sensitive and systematic observation of behavior is really the only way to monitor gradual shifts across imperfect responding… (p. 44)

We also have provided examples of contingent teaching that resulted

| Table 5. Emma’s Word Solving During Writing Over Two Lessons |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Word-Solving Action** | **Examples from Emma’s Lessons** |
| Writes known words quickly | Have, and, house, get, with, then |
| Attempts on practice page and quickly self-confirms | hide, snowball, coco, make |
| Learns new words | angel, your, put |
| Makes multiple attempts and self-corrects | seck/sec/sec hooc/huc/hook |
| Attempts once, followed by a teacher told | wach/watch fit/fight bot/boat |
| Attempts and teacher gives alternatives from which Emma chooses | frst/first wrms/worms yoar/your |
| Multiple attempts followed by a teacher told | drinc/drinck or drink, |
| | mu, mooves/movies |
from the signals of control the child provided us. Lyons, Pinnell, and DeFord (1993) have suggested that such contingent teaching is a “catalyst to advance the concepts the child is developing” (p. 145).

Ultimately we highlight the importance of continually peeling back the white tape, challenging its use in daily lessons, and studying a child’s attempts on the work page as practices for rich teacher reflection that will produce accelerative teaching during the lesson’s writing component.

References

Children’s Books Cited

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