Setting Sail and Staying the Course

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Author’s note: All teacher and children’s names are pseudonyms. All citations of Clay’s work in this article, unless otherwise noted, refer to Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals (2nd ed.), published in 2016.

Simply by sailing in a new direction, one could enlarge the world.
— Allan Curnow

The sailing metaphor is widely used in literature about the life and accomplishments of Dame Marie Clay. As a distinguished New Zealand educator, Clay employed the words of New Zealand poet Allan Curnow, and the metaphor of Curnow’s 1911 poem, “Simply by Sailing in a New Direction,” as her statement. She insisted that we must continually be in search of answers in the world of Reading Recovery® educators (Fullerton et al., 2007). This article is written to clarify and remind Reading Recovery teachers why they need to pay attention to signs of difficulties early in a child’s lesson series, consider why ignoring them could lead to perilous results, and see how Clay’s words of wisdom in Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals point us in the right direction.

To continue the sailing metaphor, we look at one Reading Recovery teacher, Jill, and her student, Jason. They have just set sail in September of first grade.

Teacher: pointing to “d” on the Letter Identification task in An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2019) followed her initial request for Jason to identify the letter in some way with the question, “Do you know a word that starts with that letter?”

Jason: It looks lots like “b” and “p” but it’s different.

Teacher: Hmmm?

Jason: But I can’t remember its name so I’m just going to say “bed.”

It would be well within reason for any Reading Recovery teacher to think that Jason knew about the lowercase letter “d” in ways that were related and partially correct. It would be erroneous to assume his way of thinking was not helpful and partially incorrect. Jason was not awarded a point on the Letter Identification task. However, Jill noted that he did know something about that letter and could distinguish it from other letters. As cognitive psychologist, Steven Pinker (1999) would say, the “fingerprints of learning” were all over Jason’s response.

Although most of his results on the initial Observation Survey assessment showed scores primarily in Stanines 1 and 2, the quality of the near misses and half-right responses showed that Jason had the beginnings of a literacy processing system and that he used what he knew to help himself. However, his processing system was in formation and not yet sufficiently developed to permit accuracy, fluency, or flexibility when reading and writing even the simplest of texts.

As Jason’s lessons moved to the end of the Roaming Around the Known period, Jill began to notice more about his partially right responses. Her notes indicated Jason was satisfied and proud of those almost-right responses for which Jill had praised him. However, he was reluctant to engage in the searching and checking approaches Jill promoted. He created his own rationales for his substitutions, which were adequate to satisfy him, and ignored discrepancies even when the teacher drew attention to them, as it would have upset his logic. The lessons learned by the teacher were significant about Jason as a learner. He was fine with “good enough” and did not wish to upset his equilibrium.

Reading Recovery is a short-term intervention. Its design gets students on the right track and moving on a journey. Days can fly by—always the wind at the back sail for child and teacher—when everything is going well. The teacher tunes into the child’s developing literacy processing system and establishes the best ways to adapt teaching for individuals. The child’s learning accelerates and at the end of every lesson, the child leaves feeling they have traveled, and made changes in their thinking. The child’s brain recognizes their learning and that things are going well.

Both Reading Recovery teacher and child know when sailing conditions are poor. The struggle to shift the
child’s thinking is borne by both individuals, and effects of struggle are cyclic in nature. That is to say, if the cognitive demands on the child are too high, requiring multiple futile attempts to problem solve, negative emotional factors arise and further interfere with thinking. If one considers a time when they were late to an appointment at a new location and the map being used was not helping, it is quite likely that they were feeling some anxiety and making impetuous decisions that were leading to dead ends and incorrect locations (and possibly blaming the map for the predicament). This negative emotional response will lead some to give up on attending the event altogether. Some students feel lost in the reading or writing process and are unable to activate their personal literacy processing effectively. The cycle of emotion, motivation, and cognition (see Figure 2) spirals negatively. A noticing teacher can be most helpful by intervening to provide support and success. When cognitive demands are “just right,” the result is a positive emotional response and motivation to try to solve the next puzzle.

Jill was a sensitive observer, and she could see that they were not sailing in the right direction. She knew that sometimes, if a child’s literacy processing is more elusive to tune into and a teacher is uncertain how to adapt teaching appropriately, time may drag on, her note-taking suffers, and acceleration is not evident. Jason’s weekly book graph (Figure 1) told her something was not right.

If the child is finding their journey to be in the doldrums or in a tempest (see shaded insert), it is our job, as specially trained teachers to find the right way to teach this child, to always be in search of another way. This is what Clay advocated. Askew (2007) stated, “Marie’s perpetual state of inquiry had a profound effect on me. At first, it was not always comfortable … I had to abandon some ‘safe havens’ and be open to new ways of thinking, asking new questions of my own. What a gift she gave me—both professionally and personally” (p. 89).

The doldrums is a colloquial expression derived from historical maritime usage, in which it refers to those parts of the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean affected by a low-pressure area around the equator where the prevailing winds are calm. The doldrums are also noted for calm periods when the winds disappear altogether, trapping sail-powered boats for periods of days or weeks. There is a way out of the slump by rowing the boat. A tempest is a violent windy storm.
Sensitive Observation and New Thinking

There must be times when the teacher stops teaching and becomes an observer, a time when she must drop all her pre-suppositions about a child, and when she listens very carefully and records very precisely what that particular child can in fact do (Clay, p. 12).

As Jason’s response to the lowercase letter “d” showed, flexibility in thinking while examining something familiar helped. A teacher shifting perspectives and adjusting teaching practice to support the idiosyncratic processing of the individual child will achieve acceleration. The child’s processing challenges will be invisible, but there will be clues in what the child does and says, so recording precisely and analyzing carefully is critical.

What are some overt signals that all is not well from the child’s perspective?

- The child is reluctant to come to lessons.
- The child complains that things may be hard.
- There are signs of tension (twirling hair, stretching, yawning, wiggling, diversionary talk, difficulty engaging, touching objects on the table, falling off the chair) during parts of the lesson.
- The child seems to easily revert to old ways of thinking.
- The child is not able to demonstrate what was taught in the last lesson.

During professional development sessions, teacher leaders guide teachers to look at Clay’s literacy processing theory and the teaching procedures outlined in her texts to guide possible ways to work with individuals. The aim of this article is to urge inquiry and to provide some ideas about looking at evidence differently.

Does the child’s book graph have plateaus or mountains and valleys? Does a child’s learning seem to take two steps forward and one step back? Is the child’s Writing Vocabulary chart mostly blank? Is the running record analysis the same day after day? Do lesson records look like the teacher is in a state of confusion or is there an overabundance of blank space? Is more time spent worrying rather than celebrating?

There is a cycle (Figure 2) at play that is affecting progress. When a child does not achieve sufficient successes in day-to-day reading and writing, it is possible that an emotional element of fear (along with a fight, flight, or freeze response) can lead to a lack of self-assurance which is difficult to replace with a positive emotional response. Negative emotional responding must be overcome, and an even greater amount of positive emotional responding must be achieved to improve motivation. Even neutral emotional responding is not enough. That is not to say teachers should give false praise, but rather the child’s brain will reward itself when problem solving is successful because they can self-monitor their reading and writing; they know how and where to search for further information; and they self-correct errors because they can. Positive emotional responses prove to be motivational when the child encounters new problems so that they willingly engage in some or all problem solving on their own or with the right kind of support from the teacher. Successful reading and writing work changes the way the child thinks about problem solving new challenges and about themselves as a reader and a writer, not struggling with insurmountable challenges. This cycle is true for both children and their teachers. A negative cycle is certainly defeating for the learner, but a teacher’s perspective of their own efficacy can also lead to a fight, flight, or freeze response.

What is called for is self-reflection. Teachers must look thoughtfully and

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Figure 2. Emotion-Motivation-Cognition Cycle

- Emotional
- Cognitive
- Motivational
thoroughly at their own teaching and think in different ways about how individual children respond. If the way a teacher has been thinking is not working, then it is essential that the evidence be tipped on its head and examined differently. It is only by shifting our own perspectives and adjusting teaching practice (see Figure 3) to support the idiosyncratic processing of the individual child that one will meet the challenges.

Asking for help from colleagues is expected and welcome. A growth mindset benefits an adaptive teacher who thinks in innovative ways.

Teachers can control some elements of the learning context in which the child finds himself. Keeping in mind David Wood’s (2003) perspectives on contingent teaching to organize our thoughts, we can consider three aspects: domain contingency, instructional contingency, and temporal contingency. Domain contingency refers to what is being taught — what literacy processing is being fostered and what degree of difficulty the task requires (i.e., text level and story being composed). Instructional contingency refers to how it is being taught — what kind of verbal and non-verbal support and how much support is given to ensure the child is successful. Temporal contingency refers to the timing of the support — when in the lesson the support is given and the rhythm of the interactions between child and teacher (Wood, 2003; Lose, 2007; Matczuk & Straw, 2005). Tutoring will work when these three aspects of instruction are in balance and supporting each other.

The important factor is the balance between what the child is being asked to do and the kind of support being offered (see Figure 4) so that the success is achieved in a stable state of equilibrium. Another way to think of this is that the child will be working with the teacher in his zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

### Figure 3. Questions to Guide Teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of Thinking …</th>
<th>Try Thinking (Growth Mindset)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He is not motivated to do this.</td>
<td>How can I design lessons for him?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He is not ready for this.</td>
<td>What do my lesson records show?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There must be something else happening.</td>
<td>How can I make sure he feels he belongs to the reading and writing community and I’m on his side?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cannot help him in 20 weeks. He needs to be referred to a specialist.</td>
<td>What can he do independently? What are his strengths?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He cannot remember from one day to the next.</td>
<td>How can I arrange for success?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have tried everything and nothing works.</td>
<td>What is the next easiest thing for him to learn? Did any part of it work? Where can I learn more? What else can I read? With whom can I talk? How can I make the learning more memorable for him? What will it take to capture his brain’s attention?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 4. Balance of Task Difficulty and Contingent Support
1980) and will have many opportunities in the lesson to work in his zone of actual development to reinforce his current competencies. That is, the literacy processing the teacher supports in the lesson will be on the cutting edge of the child’s current competencies.

Clay recommends several actions that teachers can take to ensure this balance can occur and inform the instructional side of the balance. From day-to-day lessons and week-to-week reflections, teachers need to be able to

- find each learner’s starting point,
- observe how children work on easy tasks when things go well,
- respond to children’s initiatives and interact with their thinking,
- observe how they work on novel things,
- applaud what is correct in a partially correct response, and
- identify strengths as firm ground on which to build. (Clay, p. 213)

Concern 1: Behaviors Signal Lapses in the Establishment of an Early Literacy Processing System

When a teacher is unsure about their interpretation of the child’s reading as captured in running records or feels they have lost sight of today’s starting point, or if their own note-taking needs some attention, talking with a teacher leader or a colleague will help. A teacher might want to look at the child’s original Observation Survey and consider not only the aspects where the child succeeded, but also where the partially correct response or the confusions lie.

Investigate records of reading

Jill reviewed Jason’s book graph (see Figure 1) and his running records (see Figure 5).

While it had only been a few weeks, time was marching on while Jason’s progress and spirits languished. Jill knew it was up to her to sort through this problem. As she reviewed Jason’s running records, she saw that he stopped taking action when he came to a problem or made an error in text. He used some information but not enough. There was only one attempt made, and while he seemed to be cross-checking on information in some way, it did not result in his taking action to search further or make multiple attempts. The lesson record should have sufficient notes to allow a teacher to reflect; a child who is finding the learning confusing may also have a teacher who is confused about what to record.

Clay has advocated that, for children who enter with low scores, it is
important to pay attention to the Concepts About Print task (Clay, 2019, pp. 133–135.) The [reading and writing] emphases in tomorrow’s lesson will arise out of today’s observations (Clay, 2016, p. 214), which must be adequately recorded to allow the teacher to have crystal clear observations and to make superb decisions. Jill found that when she looked at Jason’s responses in Concepts About Print, he had knowledge about the concept of “first” but not “last” whether it was about words or the story. This was also noted in Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words, where he was able to record the first letter of words but did not record any other sounds even when his slow articulation showed an ability to say words correctly and slowly.

The results of his Writing Vocabulary task showed that he recorded familiar words correctly (and quickly according to the teacher’s notes); but his attempts for other words (names of his brothers) showed that he recorded only the first letter or two correctly and completed the word incorrectly—or did not attempt to complete the word.

Laying out lesson records, running records, charts of Writing Vocabulary, Reading Vocabulary, and Change Over Time in Text Reading can provide oversight of all the evidence. Looking at them objectively and reflecting on what daily lesson records show can help to identify trends and mismatches:

- A flat line or plateau on the text reading graph, especially at Levels 3 and 4 is identified.
- Notes about the child’s hand movement (even a slight hesitation) when writing or pointing while reading has been observed to show possible directional confusion in pointing or writing.
- Whether or not there has been minimal growth in a Reading and Writing Vocabulary, words are added slowly beyond the first 2 weeks of lessons.
- The running records may show that high-frequency words are confounding the child. For example, confusions about “the” and “a” or “can” and “come.”
- Observations during reading show that the child may be cross-checking on information but fails to search for or use more information. Clay suggests it is an “early behaviour” and “tentative” in nature and that it “occurs when the child is not satisfied with his response for some reason” signaled by making another attempt, or looking back, or pausing to think” (Clay, p. 136), or simply furrowing of the brow.
- The reading or writing vocabulary charts are limited or have many two-letter words, or lots of partially known words.
- Visual analysis of words recorded on the daily lesson record and the running record do not consistently show a left-to-right analysis.
- Child’s attempts on the working page show lapses in directional movement possibly even at the letter level.
- A small reading and writing vocabulary means that the child has very little to link new learning to. It also means that the child has very few secure footholds in print to help him to check on himself.

Take action

Clay addresses issues surrounding early processing learning for this important development in the child’s literacy processing. A shaky foundation leads to assembly problems down the line and they are difficult to sort out the longer they are practiced. Some clear, crisp teaching is essential! While some key ideas are posed here, taking time to go to the pages indicated in Clay’s work to read more and talk with colleagues can have positive results.

The teaching should not start where the teacher is but where the child is (Clay, p. 29)! We all lean toward our personal habits of ways to begin the first 10 lessons; however, since the child’s processing system and body of known information is idiosyncratic, no two children will have identical lessons designed for them.

Being sensitive to the child’s thinking allows the teacher to draw his attention to many things (Clay, p. 31). This is why we need to go beyond the items of knowledge a child knows and think about how he responds in a teaching situation and the way he works out a problem.

The child needs to feel in control of what you ask him to do (Clay, p. 32). Some apparently confident children feel they are in control even when they make many errors, while others are more anxious and, if asked to do something, they may show limited confidence or be hesitant to try or may resist any coaxing by the teacher.
Listen carefully to what the child says and the connections he is making when attempting to hear and record the sounds in words or when taking words apart in reading (Clay, p. 32). Jason's thinking was evident in the first example of identifying the letter “d.” Not every child provides a window to their thinking.

Even the more competent readers will benefit from hearing how story reading should sound as part of ‘roaming around the known’ (Clay, p. 33). It is a search for common understanding of teacher expectations. Does the child know what the teacher expects when she asks him to “put it all together and make it sound like talking”?

You will have found some texts that the child can read at 90% accuracy or above (Clay, p. 33). This is where teachers can notice what the child notices in the text and it is also where things that may not have captured the child’s attention can be pointed out. This is also how the teacher discovers how to support the individual on new text, for a brief period.

Your lesson record as you move into instruction … will have a brief note about what you did and how the child responded (Clay, p. 35). Information that reflects what you asked the child to do and how you asked them to do it helps if you are able to note how the child responded to your demonstration or your prompt to think and take action.

The progress of a child … [d]epends on the teacher knowing when to slow up and attend to detail and how soon to call for quick responding (Clay, p. 41). Engagement of the child by writing little stories that include their name, their activities, and their interests, plus many movement or kinesthetic approaches to learning words, have great payoff in engaging the child in constructing foundational concepts about print in the earliest days of lessons.

It is advisable to crystalize current thinking by putting the plan in writing and reviewing it after the next three to five lessons (Clay, pp. 211–214). This may result in updates to the initial predictions of progress. Consider what was written in the comments section of the lesson records and changes since the last predictions of progress (“…will need to learn how to … in order to … And I will need to pay special attention to …”). Did lessons in the child’s “known” help him to secure the existing foundations? Were observations of the child’s responses recorded in enough detail? Are there observable behaviors that show where readings in Literacy Lessons and the suggestions made by a colleague or teacher leader have been incorporated into instruction and resulted in a change? If not, what should the teacher do? Is there more to say about that here?

Concern 2: Progress in Writing is Slow

Reading Recovery teacher leaders showed that observations of lessons and conversations with teachers had revealed a growing concern about a child who is not making progress in writing, particularly in the first 5 to 10 weeks of their lesson series. When a child has a writing vocabulary that is limited, slow to grow, or lacks variety in the words, the resulting conditions for the learner can be uncertain. Such a situation is likely to be ripe for the writing of the daily story to be slow and laborious, leading to a tendency to go overtime in the lessons and a lack of positive responses from the child leading to a lack of motivation to participate.

Teachers have reported the writing portion of the lesson to be more difficult than the reading portion to note records. While we note all that we can, it is also possible to view the child’s writing booklet and use the page for teaching and trials to fill in some blanks. Putting those observations in writing on the daily lesson record help to review progress effectively, particularly when used in conjunction with the day’s written story. Teachers devise ways to note the trends for an individual child that may indicate the following:

• Having a brief conversation leading to the composing of a story is difficult. The child may be reticent or gregarious or have difficulty engaging in a serve-and-return conversation. It helps to put your observations into words to describe an individual’s conversation.

• Stories being written are very short with a pattern that is repeated again and again. Despite a teacher’s attempts to shape the composition, any suggestion is rejected by the child.

• There are errors on words that were worked on together in the last few lessons. Perhaps efforts to add to the child’s writing vocabulary were not sufficient or the word being added was not the right one. It is very difficult to add some little words
such as “but,” since there is not a clear meaning to the word. It is much easier to add a word that is meaningful to this 6-year-old, such as “dog.”

- There is work to be done on every word in the story. If the teacher has given up on sharing the pen as the child writes, there may be too much for the child to work on in order to record an interesting story.

- There is a battle with the clock to get the story completed. This situation leads to stealing time from the first reading of the new book or having the lesson go beyond 30 minutes.

The writing portion of the lesson is as important as the reading portion of the lesson, though it sometimes suffers from neglect. The three tasks of the Observation Survey that are most highly correlated are Writing Vocabulary, Instructional Text Level, and Word Reading (Clay, 2013, pp. 172–173). One must understand that easy-to-write words that occur often in sentences provide a scaffold for the message, leaving the writer’s attention free to work at constructing less-familiar words in both reading and writing.

Jill had found that Jason easily engaged in conversation, and the serve-and-return communication was relaxed. By reviewing records in Lessons 12 to 16, she was able to see the signs that all may not be well. Table 1 is a weekly sample of the stories Jason composed. He had reduced his delightful conversations into very simple, truncated messages that contained words he knew and almost knew. When compared with the longest utterance, there is a noticeable difference!

### Table 1. Weekly Sample of Stories/Messages Composed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Message</th>
<th>Longest Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 10</td>
<td>I am six. I am tall.</td>
<td>I love to come to school, as soon as I turned six my mom said I could go every day and meet my friends and do things that I like to do and even have my lunch at school but my brother can’t because he’s too little.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 1</td>
<td>I like to play XBox.</td>
<td>My family has an XBox and I play when my brothers aren’t home to bug me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 17</td>
<td>Me and mom like to play XBox.</td>
<td>So we came home and my dad said he was too busy to play with us but my mom always plays with us and she lets us go inside and go outside and find our toys and sometimes my little brother tells on me and I get in trouble but I don’t care cuz I can play XBox and I even beat my mom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 1</td>
<td>Me and Todd and Mom like to play XBox.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Investigate records of writing

Once again, take time to go to the pages indicated in *Literacy Lessons* to read more and then talk with colleagues about what you have read. One idea is to mark the date of a colleague or teacher leader visit to observe a lesson right onto the weekly records so that you might notice a shift in the child’s learning directly connected to the visit. The Change Over Time in Writing Vocabulary for Emma (Figure 6) includes a star where the teacher had a visit from a colleague.

Throughout a lesson series, teacher support (*instructional contingency*) and task difficulty (*domain contingency*) must be adjusted. Knowing when to make adjustments relies on careful observation and a review of notes taken about the current processing the child engages in making words more familiar in writing. Decisions must be made moment by moment but can be informed by recent observations.

- In selecting the words that will be written by the child and those that will be written by the teacher, even if you say very early on, “Watch me write that word,” you might also enlist the child’s participation saying something like, “an ‘e’ is needed here. Can you make one?” (Clay, p. 82). You invited this contribution because you are certain that the child can do this without effort.

- Clay states that “Children’s partly right and partly wrong actions or comments are unexpected, and cry out for explanation, making us ask, ‘Why did she or he do or say..."
that?” (Clay, p. 37). As the example of Jason working out the letter “d” showed, he had reasoned a likely response based on his own knowledge and experience plus an anticipation of what the teacher was asking.

- Consider the development of awareness about Concepts About Print. Does the child know a difference between a letter and a word? Does he or she use the word in oral language on a regular basis?

Sometimes we try to teach our highly frequent words instead of the child’s high-frequency words. It is of little use to teach a child to write the word “am” when it is rarely used in their oral language at the present time.

- Teachers provide scaffolds for increasing awareness. Use your lesson records to check on what you are scaffolding as well as how you are scaffolding this learning for this child.

Remember that these are 6-year-old children and that it is developmental. Awareness develops over time when opportunities and experiences contribute. But we also know that instruction leads development. Teachers must decide how to do this and design opportunities that arrange for the child to succeed. Maintaining a watchful stance allows for teaching on the leading edge of development.

When considering phonemic awareness (which has to do with the sounds one hears, not the letters one sees), most children entering their first year of schooling are not conscious that sentences are made up of individual words, let alone that words can be segmented into phonemes. However, most are aware of this a year later (Clay, 2019, p. 49). This is the result of learning opportunities and a teacher who knows there is more to be developed than just knowing the names of letters and a corresponding sound. In describing the progress of a child’s increasing control over aspects of learning, Clay (2014) points out the following progression:

- The children are becoming aware, they are attending.
- They consolidate awareness (and reinforce what is known).
- Awareness opens up in new ways, so the child sees aspects that he has never seen before.
- New awareness, interest, and actions are awakened.
- Awareness expands and the teacher checks it out in another place and on another day. (p. 64)
Take action
“The art is to expose the child to opportunities to deal successfully with certain words so that they become familiar, and like old friends” (Clay, p. 156). The adage, “success breeds success,” is true. The child’s successes will bolster confidence, positive emotion, and motivation. Think about how the following progression fosters success. It all begins with selecting a word from the composition that will be most facilitative for this child to work with and learn from.

Start by writing the word clearly on the working page. Help the child write the word correctly, look at it carefully, and write it a few more times on various parts of the working page. Have him check his attempt each time with the word, you wrote (Clay, p. 89). This does not mean lines, circles, four corners, or any particular number of times like three, five, or seven repetitions. It means as many times and in as many ways and places as required. Most notably, a space like the large chalkboard or whiteboard where you have ample space for many repetitions facilitates the child’s learning. For some children, the whiteboard is too slippery and the rougher surface of a chalkboard or a large piece of construction paper using chalk allows for greater control of the letter and word formation and provides greater feedback through the child’s hands.

What’s does this child’s “tentative responding” look like? What are signs of hesitation? Can you observe uncertainty, even if it is a furrowed brow or a pursing of the lips?

Have you chosen a word that will be used often by this child? (Clay, p. 90). The word may not be used frequently by everyone, but it is by this particular student, as in Jason’s example of the word “Jets” which is his favorite hockey team.

But he knew it yesterday! We all have difficulty remembering some things at times. This is particularly so if we did not know what to pay attention to in the first place or had too many things we were trying to remember or if we weren’t as aware of why we might need to remember the word.

• At any time in the lesson series, if false moves stubbornly recur, the teacher will need to thoroughly and carefully retrace the learning path, not allowing an error of letter selection or order to occur (Clay, p. 91).

• Fluctuations in performance are to be expected. However, when a child has difficulty with recall on most occasions, not just a temporary lapse (Clay, p. 176), it is helpful to remember the quote from Dr. Larry Squires at the beginning of Literacy Lessons. He cautions that in order to be “more savvy about the way you remember things … have a good system. Notice your errors and try to fix them.”

The teacher is constantly urging the child to lift control and add new knowledge. This will challenge some old knowledge. Adding new writing vocabulary is a matter of finding a place for a new word amongst the many other orthographic patterns that have been learned.

Savoring vs. quenching. When working to build a writing vocabulary, there is a delicate balance to be struck between allowing the child the opportunity to (slowly) solve the problem and prompting for speedy production (Clay, p. 88). When the child is just learning about a word—“look,” for example—they might need to feel the word, run their finger over it, talk about what they notice, and the teacher might point out other aspects worth noting. Tracing the letters might be a start. The letters “L” and “O” are likely easy, but the letter “K” is a bit of a crooked looking thing with unusual angles. That is where one might need to do a little teaching. The teacher helps the student know how to “savor” the whole word until they know it very well. Then, in the next few days look for the opportunities to take that known word and encourage fast production so that the writing of the word quenches the need to write more and to write quickly.

Caution. Think carefully about asking the child to quickly write the word which has just been learned. When this demand is put on a child who is just beginning to build a repertoire of words or feel in control of learning new words, a request to “speed up” can be overwhelming and it can easily interfere with progress and motivation. It takes a number of experiences to get the first words learned and to notice the discriminative features. Later on, when the child knows more about words and more about how to learn new ones, the process will likely speed up. It is not the aim of Reading Recovery teachers to inadvertently create problems, but consider the sensitive observation required to know when learning is secure for each child, secure enough so that it contributes to the development of their literacy processing system.
Concern 3: Reading Progress is Stagnant or Chaotic

In every lesson, teachers have the opportunity to reinforce the appropriate processing a student engages in. They have the opportunity to build on the secure aspects of the child’s processing system and to know what the next, most useful thing is to teach and when to teach it. All of the little check marks noted on a running record tell a story. They represent processing that has gone well, and they should not be ignored but used for their potential for the child to notice more. Perhaps the child has done something successfully today, without overt behaviors other than correctly reading a phrase, which had been troublesome only the day before. While Jason’s book graph (see Figure 1) was quite flat, Emma’s (Figure 7) shows that her progress is more chaotic and tempestuous. The stats written onto the graph indicate colleague consultation by her teacher.

Investigate running records

Investigate several running records, which accurately record ALL reading behaviors observed, to look for any of the following missteps:

- The child self-monitors but is not sure where to search or what to search for.
- The child’s attempts at a new or unknown word is a letter-by-letter analysis without keeping meaning and/or structure in mind thereby not commonly integrating meaning and structure with visual information.
- The reading does not sound good.
- There are many ‘Tolds’ on the running record (both with and without an attempt by the child).
- Attempts are not quick.
- The child is looking for little words in big words (“so,” “me”) rather than useful clusters of letters he recognizes.
- The child’s visual analysis of words or phrases does not respect left-to-right order.
- The child cannot get phrasing going independently.
- The child looks at the teacher but does not verbally appeal for help.

Clay clearly states, “the habit of left-to-right scanning of print is a very important transition to facilitate from the first week of a child’s lesson series” (p. 202). “If a varied approach to scanning print goes unnoticed then the child might be allowing himself to practise alternatives daily to left-to-right attention to print. Lapses are important: they should be dealt with immediately” (p. 172). In addition, she points out that word work in

Figure 7. Emma’s Change Over Time Text Graph
taking words apart while reading or when working with words in isolation (no matter how interesting and useful they are) need to be words noticed by the child rather than words on a teacher’s list of what matters most. It would not be advisable to use words that are unrelated to today’s reading and writing task as that would make them difficult to remember.

Most words studied in isolation should emerge from, and relate to, the current work going on elsewhere in the lessons. The activities refresh and repeat successful recent experience (perhaps from yesterday’s words in reading or writing) and consolidate some links” … Teachers will need to keep good records of the words they have used with each child. (Clay, p. 155)

Jill made an effort to have Jason scan left to right at the word level and attempted to draw Jason’s attention to the ends of the words by looking at two words that were read correctly and by talking about the scanning from left to right across the entire word (see Figure 8). She made sure he looked at the onset of the word as well as the rime by employing the use of a masking card and Jason’s finger to help his visual attention. This resulted in her being able to use the prompt, “Say it slowly and move your finger under it, like this” (Clay, p. 54) until he was able to use just his eyes alone. She could then observe how he worked with a word on which he had paused to guide her next move to teach, to prompt, or to praise him. The important thing was that the teacher was able to observe an overt behavior indicating that he was able to use more visual information to self-monitor his reading. Jill wanted Jason to be dissatisfied with only using some information. Although he was initially discouraged and impatient with himself and continued to resist help from his teacher, within 2 days he had made the required shift and was much more consistent and effective self-monitoring his reading (and rereading his writing) largely due to his success in using left-to-right scanning at the word level.

Jill: Were you right?
Jason: No, for sure wrong.

Jill: Try it again, and think what would look right at the first AND last part of that word.

Jason: (rereads with the same error)
Jill: Did you look carefully? What letter would you expect to see at the end of the word “summer”?
Jason: “R.” I did that.
Jill: The word is “spring.” Take a look at the last part of that word. Do you see the part that says “ing”?

**Figure 8. Jason’s Running Record of Baby Lamb**
Jason: That’s what I said.

Jill had learned that what she paid attention to, Jason paid attention to. His scanning at the word level had been incomplete but was now shifted so that he did take a good look at more than the first letter at the beginning of the word. In the example provided, his response, “No, for sure wrong” is an indicator of his monitoring of visual information — and his monitoring of visual information (because it makes sense and sounds right).

**Take action**

When dealing with running record analysis, remember to take the child’s use of meaning and structure into consideration before looking at the child’s use of visual information. All substitutions—those grossly or slightly different from the word in the text—will be visually different in some way.

As the child’s proficiency in looking at words in serial order becomes more secure, they will become more aware of processing visual information beyond the initial letter. Reinforcing this visual processing while maintaining attention to meaning and structure as key sources of information is the teacher’s challenge. For example, in *Blackberries* (Randell, 1996) the child read “Father Bear and Mama Bear and Baby Bear went to look for blackberries.” This reading shows the child using all sources of information (i.e., the picture clearly shows the mother and the initial visual information, “M,” in the child’s substitution for “Mother” is correct). The teacher’s response needs to be based on her knowledge of the child’s known. In this case, the teacher is confident that the child can visually scan a word in serial order to analyze visual information across the entire word. To support this reader’s more effective processing, the teacher might say “It could be Mama. And, what else could it be?” In this way, the child’s use of meaning and structure is acknowledged, and the teacher invites the child to search further (i.e., to check information sources in more detail). If this reader corrects their reading, the teacher may reinforce their processing of visual information and encourage checking by asking “Does it look right? What would you expect to see at the end of Mama?” If the child notices and corrects the error, the teacher can add “Are you right? And does it make sense?” In this way, the teacher reinforces the reader’s further searching of multiple sources of information (in this instance visual information found at the end of the word by scanning the entire word “Mother,” and meaning information by checking the picture) and fosters checking all sources of information to confirm that they are right.

Following are suggestions to encourage this left-to-right scanning of a word so that it can be used for more complex processing such as self-monitoring, confirming, and further searching of visual information:

- Ask how you can “decrease the occurrence of the unwanted behavior, and increase the occurrence of the wanted behavior” (Clay, p. 181).
- Use magnetic letters at the white board to learn a new word that can be read effortlessly during text reading.
- Have the child write the word on unlined paper so that it becomes well-known and useful for self-monitoring in reading and in writing.
- For a while, think about similar words to consolidate searching for and using further visual information. For example, if the word “other” becomes well-known it can be used to help solve words in reading that look similar (brother, others) and words in writing that sound similar (another, mother).
- Use a little slip of paper as a masking card (your fingers may not be ideal) to help the child to see what should be attended to.
- “… [D]o not allow any scope for lapses from a strictly left-to-right approach. Overemphasis is appropriate until a new habit has been established. Be cautious about activities with letters and words in isolation …” (Clay, p. 172).

Clay references procedures to take and says to “repeat these activities often for at least six days” (Clay, p. 173). It is rare for a specific number to be mentioned, but one must assume that there had been a tendency among teachers to attempt to rush this change into a day or two, when this critical aspect of reading demands that it be consolidated as soon as possible.

The early intervention teacher’s task is not to analyse the language in order to present it to the child. Her task is to analyse the child’s learning, so she knows how to shape his encounters with the language. (Clay, p. 155)
This is a bold and complex perspective worthy of discussion in the Reading Recovery session. When language in text is taken apart to the word or letter level, rather than presented as a whole sentence, a developmental component of young children’s learning is being ignored. Children below the age of 7 tend to be able to pay attention either to the parts (the letters or individual words) or the whole (the meaningful phrase or message) but are unable to “attend to or perceive both at the same time. It’s a case of one or the other” (Wood, 1998, p. 89). To work with this developmental perspective in mind, Clay points out, “most young children engage with books at the level of the story, not with isolated words.” (Clay, p. 110). It may seem nonsensical to the child that the teacher pulls phrases out of the story, words out of phrases, and letters out of words unless the teacher’s demonstration is clear. Thus, the goal is to have the reading sound the way the author intended, with words grouped together as they are in oral language.

Investigate how the reading sounds
Teacher attention should be directed to really listening to the student read and putting the description into words. Ask yourself: How can I describe how the reading sounds and why doesn’t the reading sound good? Is the child pausing at inappropriate places or not pausing when they should? Are the wrong words grouped together with an inaccurate word emphasis? Is there a rise or fall of the voice, no matter how slight, at the right place or is the reading flat? Perhaps records and notes show the following:

• The child cannot engage in conversation about the story.
• Each page of the story takes a long time.
• It is hard for even the teacher to tell what is happening in the story.
• Substitutions do not reflect effective use of meaning and structure.

Take action
When you are learning how to unpack the nuances of phrasing in fluent reading, it may help to make an audio recording to listen to later. As you become more comfortable and experienced, you may be able to use the opportunity at professional development sessions to explore the sound of the reading further. An audio recording will ultimately not be needed because you will have learned how to listen “on the run” and make the comment at the end of your running record descriptive and meaningful. Ask yourself the following questions:

• Does this child believe he is reading a story or does he think he is merely reading a list of words?
• Does this child understand this story?
• Do I have an ear for the sound of good reading (e.g., fluent and phrased, reading with expression)?

Clay suggests ways to support the development of phrasing in fluent reading, all of which is intended to help the child develop an ear for how the reading should sound.

• Reading some stories together (Clay, p. 125).
• Rereading some stories from past lessons so that they sound good (Clay, p. 112).
• Using [phrasing] … in a manageable new book as an emphasis in teaching (Clay, pp. 115–16).

“No one can impose fluent reading on the complex task of reading continuous text any more than they can make the beginning writer a fast writer. It takes time to develop fast control of many subparts of a complex whole so that it operates smoothly and fluently” (Clay, p. 122). “We also know that learning how to make the reading sound phrased has a great deal to do with knowing how to look at text” (Clay, p. 126). “The child needs to be able to see the words that go together. We have procedure designed for exactly this” (Clay, pp. 123–124).

Consider the phrase below:

**Baby Bear went on fishing.**

Baby Bear went on fishing.

The first example will render a confused meaning if the first phrase is grouped together and the sentence is complete. However, in the second example, words are grouped in a more meaningful and structurally appropriate way which helps the reader understand what Baby Bear did.

Some children may need to practice a phrase such as “went on fishing” since it reflects book language rather than conversational language. This aspect of improved phrasing can be a teaching point at multiple places in the lesson. In familiar reading and rereading yesterday’s new story, the teacher can think about how the phrasing can be improved with one
or two powerful examples where the child has almost been successful. During the writing portion of the lesson, the child can work on putting words together as he or she composes and rereads the partially recorded composition. The cut-up story offers another opportunity to think about phrasing (Clay, pp. 106–109). The introduction to the new story and the first reading of the new story are two more opportunities for the teacher to emphasize saying, seeing, hearing, and reading groups of words together.

Thoughtful running record analysis with phrasing in mind allows the teacher to describe the effectiveness of instruction on phrasing in fluent reading. It allows the teacher to describe how the child self-monitors and the effect of phrasing in that process. Think about the way the child engages in searching. Has the sound of the meaningful phrases played a role in the way he or she searches at any point?

**Concern 4: Lessons Are Not Delivered Daily**

Initially, it had taken Jill almost 3 weeks of school to achieve 10 lessons with Jason. This does not negate the observations she had made about his learning, but it impeded Jason’s successes. Her teacher leader identified this as a contributing factor to his progress and Jill’s challenge to achieve a shift in his learning. Jason’s attendance record revealed that in the first 15 days that school was open, there had been a day of school closure for staff professional learning, a half-day event of a fun run for all students, a bus safety demonstration for his class, and 2 days (both Fridays) when Jason was absent from school.

**Investigate attendance**

One of the key principles of Reading Recovery is providing daily lessons. For any other deeper analysis of responding to children to be effective, daily instruction must be in place (Clay, p. 21). What do your attendance records show? Are the students getting a lesson every day? If lessons are missed, find out why and determine what was responsible for the Reading Recovery teacher being unable to deliver a lesson every day that school is open.

As one Reading Recovery teacher aptly reflected:

*In Reading Recovery, we have a responsibility to persist professionally in getting five lessons a week. School days are busy, classrooms are busy, and teachers are busy. That does not diminish my responsibility to deliver daily lessons to students during my Reading Recovery time. The outcome of daily lessons is accelerated learning for those students who need a little bit, often. As we persist professionally to deliver daily lessons, students’ literate learning accelerates at a faster pace. My increased sense of accountability this year ensures daily lessons, which then guarantees accelerated learning. I see students progress in their reading and writing by building on strengths that came out of yesterday’s lesson, tomorrow’s teaching emphasis comes from today’s observations. The resulting impact of daily lessons is success. I feel re-ignited about supporting students and my students are excited to come into my teaching space every day!*

**Take action**

All aspects of learning are difficult when there is only a lesson now and then. The teacher can work with the school team, which includes the principal, and with the family or caregivers of the child. If communications with the family include news of success, accomplishment, and positive anecdotes, it is more likely that school and home will be able to work together to improve this one critical aspect of the learning conditions. Find out why attendance is not regular and offer ways to support regular attendance. It is not helpful to make assumptions or to lay blame; arrange for success.

**Final Words**

It is helpful to reflect on each lesson and a span of three to five lessons to consider what the child has learned to do and how the teacher has arranged for success. Wishing and hoping for change are not plans for improvement. Think about how you can make it easy for this child to learn, keeping in mind that we design lessons for individuals. Look for reduced tension in the child, it will lead to reduced tension in the teacher (even if the child had never noticed you were challenged in that regard)! Create failsafe situations for the child (and for you). No one can sail or learn under dangerous circumstances. It is only when learning is safe that we can all relax. This means that once you identify what it is you need to teach the child to do now, you will need to let some other things go for a time. We aren’t teaching for perfection. We are teaching so that the child knows how to solve problems for himself or herself, and this means there will be some stumbles and some errors for the child’s processing system to learn.
Teaching

how to resolve. Be persistent, consistent, and insistent in your teaching, always with a relaxed posture and an enigmatic smile. Look for reduced tension and increased celebration in the child and in yourself. Dig in to create a positive learning environment for growth!

Marie Clay reminded us, “If the child is a struggling reader or writer the conclusion must be that we have not yet discovered the way to help him learn” (2005, p. 158). Parents trust teachers are acting with their child in mind, doing the best they can for each, not giving up, not suggesting that “I can’t do it for this one.” Know that you can, and you will. William Arthur Ward (1970) noted, “The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.” Adjust your sails for a child that challenges your teaching, and the course to literacy learning will become navigable.

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