

Exploring the Purposes, Power, and Potential of Familiar Reading

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Jane (pseudonym), a student receiving Reading Recovery® intervention, sits by her teacher to start their lesson for the day. As always, her teacher has carefully selected several familiar books for her to choose from in this lesson. Jane studies each one thoughtfully before selecting a familiar favorite. She smiles as she pushes the others to the side and begins reading. While she reads, her teacher listens intently, feeling proud of Jane as she reads confidently, practicing appropriate phrasing, intonation, and fluency. This shared experience provides Jane with a fail-safe, successful start to her lesson, confirming her capabilities and reminding her she IS a reader.

Clay's literacy processing theory underscores the importance of reading continuous texts throughout each Reading Recovery lesson. This focus on book reading allows children to move beyond isolated skill instruction, which often receives disproportionate emphasis in primary classrooms, especially for emerging readers (Afflerbach, 2022; Allington, 2013; Johnston et al., 2020). Each day, children engage with both familiar, previously read books and a new, just-introduced book. These two types of reading activities serve distinct purposes, referred to as the "twin aims" (Clay, 2016, p. 111). Familiar reading, the first of these activities, provides a

powerful start to the lesson and has the potential to influence the effectiveness of the other components that follow. Careful consideration of the unique purposes and intended outcomes of familiar reading, as well as thoughtful planning to ensure those purposes and outcomes are being met, remain critical for student success and acceleration.

Key Purposes and Expected Outcomes of Familiar Reading

The Reading Recovery lesson begins with the child engaging in familiar reading opportunities. Throughout their time Roaming Around the Known and during lessons, the child accumulates many books that can be read with ease and independence (Clay, 2016). These books are kept together and accessed during the familiar reading portion of the lesson. Familiar reading involves rereading several books the child has previously encountered and collected. A common myth about familiar reading is that simply listening to a child read aloud books they have chosen from their book box is enough to successfully implement this lesson component. I'll admit, I once believed this, too. However, this simplistic approach cannot fully unlock the key purposes and intended outcomes of this important lesson component.

One key purpose of familiar reading is to provide the child with "an enjoyable start to the lesson that encourages confidence and a feeling of being in control" (Clay, 2016, p. 111). Furthermore, because the child reads multiple books daily, familiar reading significantly increases their reading volume — a crucial factor for emerging readers who often have limited opportunities to engage with continuous texts. Additionally, each successful familiar reading experience enables the child to process text independently, engaging with meaning, language, and print without undue difficulty or confusion. Success with familiar material strengthens the decision-making processes of the reader (Clay, 2016, p. 21). When texts are both familiar and easily read, children have opportunities to make discoveries about print, highlighting another powerful purpose of the familiar reading experience.

Even more, when implemented effectively, familiar reading promotes fluency, comprehension, and speed (Clay, 2016). These successful experiences foster a sense of achievement, further motivating the child. Considering these benefits, it's essential to thoughtfully consider the familiar reading component of each child's daily lesson as an integral part of the lesson, ensuring that each familiar reading experience meets the purposes for which the lesson component was built.

Integration and orchestration

Early in *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (2016), Clay emphasizes the importance of understanding reading as a process that extends beyond isolated item knowledge. According to Clay,

A theory of reading continuous text cannot arise from a theory of word reading. It involves problem-solving and the integration of behaviors not studied in a theory about analyzing words. It must, however, explain the role of word reading and letter recognition within the theory of reading continuous text. (2016, p. 16)

Clay (2015) also emphasizes the critical role of integration, particularly for emerging readers and writers. She notes that these learners require an integrated approach to accelerate their progress and catch up with their peers.

These insights confirm the importance of integration, thereby elevating the significance of reading continuous text, particularly within the familiar reading component of the lesson. Children build complex processing behaviors by repeatedly engaging with continuous text rather than solely focusing on isolated skills. Familiar reading provides an essential opportunity for children to engage with and apply this integrated problem-solving process, moving beyond isolated word analysis to develop a deeper, more cohesive understanding of text.

Classroom instruction often emphasizes isolated skill practice, which makes it essential for children in Reading Recovery to have increased opportunities to engage

with continuous texts (Allington, 2013). These experiences are critical for developing successful processing behaviors. Clay (2016) highlights the act of processing continuous text effectively as it requires integration (pulling together what the child knows about letters, sounds, words, and language) and orchestration (drawing upon and using integrated information in the appropriate sequence). Both integration and orchestration are expected outcomes of familiar reading.

Clay identifies familiar reading as a key opportunity for children to practice both integration and orchestration of complex processing strategies. During familiar reading, children draw on information from language, story meaning, and print (Clay, 2016). Since the texts have been previously read, the familiarity allows each rereading to challenge the child to orchestrate the information more quickly and smoothly. Over time, this process supports an increase in fluent reading, another expected outcome of successful familiar reading experiences.

Building reading volume to foster acceleration

The Reading Recovery lesson is carefully designed to foster accelerated learning for each student receiving the intervention. Every component of the lesson contributes to this intended acceleration. When acceleration is compromised, Clay (2016) urges teachers to reflect: “Are you operating the intervention as required, with all the activities of the daily lesson being given appropriate time and emphasis?” (p. 166). As with familiar reading, it is important to consider whether this

particular lesson component is being implemented as recommended.

To adequately answer this question, it is essential to evaluate whether the intended purposes and expected outcomes of familiar reading are being met. Lessons often run over the allocated time, and in my experience observing and teaching lessons, this issue frequently begins within the familiar reading component. When the books selected are not easily, quickly, and fluently read, the time intended for familiar reading is extended, setting off a domino effect of delays throughout the lesson. Careful selection of familiar text choices helps ensure the familiar reading component does not run long, thus impacting the remainder of the lesson.

Since one key purpose of familiar reading is to build reading volume, it is necessary for the child to read as many books as possible within the brief time allotted for this activity. Moreover, when books require too much reading effort, building reading volume is jeopardized. Because the time frame for familiar reading is relatively short, achieving this goal depends on the careful selection of books that are quick, easy, and enjoyable — setting the child up for success. It is important to remember that the familiar reading portion of the lesson is not an assessment; it is specifically designed for the child to practice successful reading. This “massive practice” (Clay, 2016, p. 112) supports children in building links between letter and sound sequences, enriching language experiences, developing comprehension, and increasing the speed of visual perception of print.

Clay (2016) recommends that 2–3 books be read during the familiar reading experience, which helps ensure the child is practicing with appropriate ease and fluency. As the child progresses to higher text levels, books may become longer, thus allowing for fewer books to be read in entirety within the familiar reading section of the lesson. There will likely be a notable difference in outcomes between a child who consistently reads only 1–2 familiar books daily and one who reads 2–3, highlighting the critical importance of building reading volume. In turn, ensuring that appropriate books are offered to the child as options is critical to fostering acceleration. When the books fail to support the purposes of familiar reading, the overall effectiveness of the lesson component—as well as the overall goal of accelerated progress—is compromised.

Building fluency as an expected outcome

Building fluency is a positive and expected outcome of the familiar reading experience. While beginning readers are still learning to connect what they see, hear, and know about print, they may initially develop a habit of reading word by word. However, Clay (2016) reminds us that this habit forms only if the teacher allows it. Grouping words into meaningful phrases should begin as soon as the child is ready, with teachers providing opportunities to practice fluent reading. Clay asserts, “At no time in the Reading Recovery lesson series should the child be a slow reader of the things he knows” (2016, p. 122). Fluent reading will sound like talking, with the child phrasing and using

the intonation of normal speech. Additionally, Clay emphasizes, “Fluent reading will be encouraged when the teacher attends to oral language, asks questions that call for thinking and interpretation of meaning, and increases opportunities to get fast access to the visual information in print” (2016, p. 123).

Fluency is fostered through repeated practice in orchestrating complex processing, which is easily achievable during familiar reading — provided the selected books are both enjoyed by and easy for the child. Enjoyment can create increased motivation, particularly for young readers. Likewise, books that are either too easy or too hard do not allow for these important acts of integration and orchestration to easily occur, and in turn, can negatively impact the child’s ability to develop those complex processing skills that support fluency building. When aligned with its intended purposes, the familiar reading component offers a rich opportunity to encourage fluency through purposeful practice and meaningful engagement with the texts.

The Importance of Choice in Familiar Reading: Teacher and Child

Understanding the distinct purposes and expected outcomes of the familiar reading component (confidence, a sense of achievement, reading volume, integration, orchestration, fluency, discovery, and an enjoyable start) helps teachers make thoughtful decisions about which books to offer each child. Student choice plays a vital role in building agency by fostering a sense of ownership, autonomy, and empowerment in the

learning process. Concomitantly, each child should have the opportunity to exercise choice in various ways throughout the Reading Recovery lesson. One specific area where the child is given a choice is found during the familiar reading component. While it is the child who ultimately selects the books to be read, the teacher must carefully curate options that align with the intended purposes of familiar reading for that lesson.

A familiar book is not one the child has memorized; rather, it should require some reading work, encouraging the discovery of new information and engagement with print (Clay, 2016). Therefore, if a book is so easy that the child does not attend to the print, it no longer serves the purposes of familiar reading and should be removed as an option. For example, if you observe a child’s eyes moving away from the print because the text is so familiar it has been memorized, it’s a sign that this book no longer supports the purposes of familiar reading. Conversely, if a book demands more than minimal reading effort, hindering processing and fluency, it is not yet suitable for this lesson component. If yesterday’s new book did not sound fast, fluent, and independent during the running record, it may not yet be appropriate for familiar reading. However, incorporating shared reading experiences with such books before adding them to familiar reading selection will be beneficial. Striking a balance ensures the familiar reading experience remains purposeful and effective.

Clay emphasizes, “You will probably want to begin with a book that is

easier or more familiar for the child and move to something less familiar” (2016, p. 112). This highlights the importance of providing a range of options for the child to choose from each book reading opportunity during familiar reading. For the initial selection, the teacher might offer 3–4 books that the child genuinely enjoys, ensuring they are ones the child reads very successfully — likely several text levels below their instructional level. Once the child reads the first book, a new set of slightly more challenging (but not hard) options should be presented, ensuring a gradual increase in difficulty. In early lessons where books are short, the possibility exists for more than 2 books to be read. As the books become longer, the number of books read during familiar reading may fluctuate.

If the child is offered only one set of options at the start of the familiar reading experience, rather than choices for each book selected, the opportunity to support the progression Clay describes as moving toward “something less familiar” (2016, p. 112) becomes limited. Additionally, teachers can ensure a variety of books are offered (and hopefully chosen) during familiar reading by offering multiple sets of book choices for each familiar reading experience. This practice allows for interaction with texts from a variety of publishers across a wide range of writing styles (see Figure 1). Thoughtful planning and variety in book selection are essential to maximize the benefits of familiar reading.

Unlocking the Power and Potential of Familiar Reading Through Purposeful Planning

Familiar reading, though seemingly simple, is a complex and essential component of the Reading Recovery lesson that demands thoughtful planning. The teacher’s intentionality in selecting book options for the child to read during familiar reading can profoundly influence the rest of the lesson and beyond. When planning this component, teachers may wish to consider, “Which books in this child’s collection allow for successful, mostly independent processing, enjoyment, and fluent reading?” and “Which books will

serve as easier, first-choice options, and which will provide slightly more difficulty as second-choice options or beyond?” Lesson records with notes on how the familiar reading sounded in previous days, running records indicating texts successfully read with evidence of increasing fluency and problem-solving behaviors, writing samples that reflect interest in specific stories or characters, and conversations about books that reveal comprehension and enjoyment should all be taken into account when planning for familiar reading.

Not all familiar reading experiences are created equal. A full understanding of the intended purposes

Figure 1. Providing Choice for Each Book Read During Familiar Reading



- Teacher: I’m so glad to see you today. I picked a few books for you to choose from. Which one do you want to read first out of this pile? Which one are you most excited to read?
- Child: The Little Red Hen
- Teacher: What do you like about that one?
- Child: I like how the animals say, “No, No, No!”
- Teacher: Yes, they aren’t very good helpers. Okay, let’s hear you read that one and make it sound like the characters are talking.
- Child: reads *The Little Red Hen*
- Teacher: Well, do you think she should have shared the bread?
- Child: No, they didn’t help!
- Teacher: You are right! Maybe they will next time. Alright, here is another set of books to choose from. Which one of these do you really like?
- Child: The Farm Concert
- Teacher: I knew it! You love making those animal noises. Off you go!

and expected outcomes of the familiar reading component empowers teachers to plan thoughtfully, ensuring that this activity serves as a powerful start to every child's daily lesson. Effective time management is critical, and making the most of the few short minutes allotted for familiar reading can have a major impact on the lesson overall. A successful beginning sets the tone for the entire lesson, creating positive momentum that carries through each subsequent component.

Choice, for both the teacher and the student, requires keen observation and a thorough understanding of all that is set to be achieved within the lesson component. When the books selected are too hard or too easy (eyes off print), the child cannot achieve all familiar reading's intended purposes (confidence, ease, flexibility, orchestration and integration, successful processing, to name a few). A book that is too hard will impact fluency building as slow, choppy reading undermines the child's ability to build reading volume in the allotted time, which is necessary for accelerated progress. In addition, books that are too challenging may not allow for integration and orchestration to be practiced, thus hindering the child's ability to build complex processing strategies. Beyond that, student motivation may be negatively impacted when reading is hard, and the confidence, sense of achievement, and being in control a child should feel during familiar reading could be jeopardized. Providing the right books at the right time is critical to ensuring the child can build reading volume while simultaneously fostering confidence and a sense of success,

all within the limited time allocated to familiar reading.

Final Thoughts

I would be remiss if I did not highlight one of Clay's most profound statements: "Reading is a message-getting, problem-solving activity, which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practiced" (2015, p. 1). This perspective underscores the significance of the reading practice that takes place during familiar reading, as it forms the foundation for successful, accelerative lessons. After reading this article, I hope you will place even greater emphasis on the familiar reading component, using it to guide and enhance your planning and teaching decisions for every child, every day.

More importantly, I hope you come to see familiar reading for the potential it can bring to your lessons — recognizing how critical this component is in ensuring that each child CAN and WILL read well and read often. Ultimately, I wish for the children you serve to eagerly anticipate their daily familiar reading time, discovering that reading is about more than just letters, sounds, and words. Instead, they will come to understand reading as the joy of the message they hear as their favorite stories flow effortlessly from

their mouths — a testament to their growing confidence and love for reading.

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