Prompting: How to Help Developing Readers

by JEFFERY WILLIAMS

Reading Recovery®, the most researched and effective early literacy intervention as rated by the What Works Clearinghouse, a program evaluation website operated by the U.S. Department of Education, is based on a complex set of theories and research. Marie Clay, clinical psychologist and founder of Reading Recovery, defined reading as a complex set of problem–solving, meaning making activities that increases in power and flexibility the more they are used (Clay, 1991, 2001, 2005, 2016). Clay (2001) wisely cautioned that simple theories used to address the complexity of reading cause learners to fill in gaps created by the simplification.

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Powerful Language to Prompt Learning

Literacy researcher and author Don Holdaway taught us about the immense power that teachers have when they read to and with children. "There is no better system to control the complexities and intricacies of each person's learning than that person's own system operating with genuine motivation and self-determination within reach of humane and informed help." And, it was Holdaway who first pointed out that our first teachers—parents, grandparents, and care-givers—are invaluable resources for shaping the literacy lives of children.

These early, first teachers, armed with ample amounts of love and determination, are naturally good at being 'humane'. Without benefit of manuals, training, or coaching, many however worry they are not 'informed' enough, often asking, *"Am I doing this right?"* or *"How else should I help?"*

What to Do

"A prompt is a call for action to do something within the child's control" (Clay, 2016, p. 36) and prompts are one of the primary tools of all literacy teachers. Some prompting happens before reading as a way to set the reader on the right path. Other prompts happen at difficulty during the reading. And some of the most useful prompts happen after reading or after some problem-solving.

Prompts Before Reading

Adults anticipate problems before they happen and use prompts to avoid them. For example, one night you notice you are low on milk and ask your spouse to get some on the way home the next day. The following day, before your spouse leaves work, you text to say: "Don't forget the milk!" You've anticipated that your request could be forgotten given all the time and distractions between your first request and the time your spouse has finished a day of work. This kind of prompt simply brings the request to the forefront *before* it is an issue.

The same principle applies to readers—simple reminders of what they need to do before they begin to read is helpful. It is even more helpful if it is something you recently talked about that they are learning to do. Some examples of prompts before reading might include:

"Remember today, when you come to a tricky word, to look for chunks or parts you know."

"Tell yourself what you can try if you come to a hard word?" (Look for parts of the word, reread and think about the story, etc.)

"Today when you read, when you come to a hard word, be sure to use your finger to help you look all the way through the word before you try it."

Prompts During Reading

Like a driver's ed instructor (or nervous parent on a practice drive with a new driver), timely prompts during a drive are helpful, too. For example, as the new driver is getting ready to make a lane change, you might say something like "look in both your mirrors before you get over'. And if the new driver forgets as s/he is switching lanes, you might also say, "use your turn signal to let others know that you are changing lanes". Driving, like reading, is a complex activity and often the best teaching opportunities occur during the activity.

But, there are a few considerations to make prompting during an activity more powerful:

- Wait to allow the learner a chance to act on their own. If we quickly prompt at difficulty, the learner doesn't get to learn how to notice and check for themselves because we are doing it for them.
- Prompting or correcting everything that is wrong will break concentration and may overwhelm the learner.
- Keep prompts short and sweet. Lengthy explanations about what happens in an engine when you accelerate too fast are not helpful in that moment and further distract the driver. Likewise, complicated lessons about the myriad of sounds of /ough/ in words like rough, through, bough, bought, thorough, etc. are not helpful in the moment. Give them enough to get moving and offer teaching afterwards.

No attempt to problem-solve at difficulty:

What might this look and sound like? Let's consider an example sentence a child might encounter, such as: "*We picked all the strawberries and laughed as we ate them*."

The child begins to read and says: "We..." [and pauses]. Very often they stay silent and hope that you will give them the word. Sometimes the child outwardly appeals to you, saying "What's that word?" or "I don't know what that says" which can be followed by either of these prompts:

> "Good, you found a tricky word. Now, what can you do to help yourself?"

> "Try something to help yourself."

This puts the child in charge and if s/he takes action and figures the word out then all is good. But, if the child offers nothing to help themselves, just offer a little more support. In a word that has regularly spelled or pronounceable word parts, like the word /picked/, the first prompt is to get them to look carefully at the word with any of the following:

> "What can you see that might help you?

> "Look at and try the first part of the word (adult uses finger to show the part that says /pick/."

> "This part is in another word you know (adult writes or says the word /sick/)."

After solving the first part, repeat to look at the /ed/ ending. Once the word has been figured out using letters/sounds, it now needs to be integrated back with other sources to check on themselves with something like:

> "Now, let's re-read and think would "picking" make sense?"

Telling or giving the child a difficult word:

Sometimes, the most humane thing one can do is to tell the child the unknown word—especially if the word does not have many helpful parts, like the word "laughed". But you can easily turn giving the child the word into a chance to learn something about that word to map it and commit it to memory. Here are two ways to that help when the best choice was to give a word:

- Offer the child a choice between two similar words. From our example sentence, if the child gets stuck on the word /laughed/ which has parts that are less easily pronounced, say something like this:

  "This word could be /laughing/ or /laughed/. Which one looks right and makes sense?"

- Another way to help is to just tell the word but require the child to do something with the parts by saying something like:

  "This is the word /laughed/. Show yourself the part that just says /laugh/. Now show yourself the last part /ed/. Slowly run your finger under the word and say it again."

In both cases the child is required to look carefully at the letters to either distinguish which word is correct or to show themselves parts of the word. Such moves help the child be more likely to know this word or parts of words in the future.

Unsuccessful problem-solving with monitoring:

Monitoring is an awareness that something is wrong. If you are driving and realize that you don't know where you are, you have monitored. Monitoring is the precursor to taking action to correct mistakes. You may re-program your GPS, call someone, stop to check a map on your phone or ask for directions, etc. to help problem-solve being lost. On the other hand, if you don't know that you are lost, you just keep driving. Like drivers, readers who do not know they are lost have no need to fix anything up...they just keep reading.

Often, when children make an error, our first instinct is to intervene quickly to tell the reader what to try to fix the problem. Doing so robs the reader of the opportunity to monitor or initiate further action. To build a child's ability to monitor, our first step has to be to let them read past the error to see if they notice it themselves. Stopping a reader to tell them what to do is like someone telling you to look at a map when you are driving. If you don't know you're lost, you don't know you need a map! However, if they pause before or after reading a word, it usually means they have monitored and you have been given an open invitation to offer support.

Using our same example sentence, "*We picked all the strawberries and laughed as we ate them.*" The child reads: "We pecked [pauses] all the strawberries. [Pauses again]. You say either:

"Good, you noticed something wasn't right. Try that again."

"You noticed something. What can you do to help yourself?"

If the child rereads incorrectly again, you may have to increase your support. Say:

"You were looking at the first letter of the word and the last part. Now look at this part... [adult isolates with finger or points out the /ick/ in /picked/ or gives an example of a similar word such as /sick/ to help if needed].

Then instruct the child to reread to make sure "picked" strawberries makes sense.

Unsuccessful problem-solving without monitoring:

But what if the child doesn't pause and just reads on and never notices a problem? Again, wait until the child stops naturally at the end of the sentence, paragraph, or page. Staying quiet also gives you a brief moment to decide how you will prompt. Don't point to the actual word that is the problem but rather point to a place to begin rereading close to the error with a general prompt such as:

> "Something tricked you. Try that again."

This gives the child the opportunity to notice the error and very often, they fix up what was wrong.

Instead of staying general, you could have used your wait time to think of which of these prompts would fit what you just saw:

> "Reread this part. Something didn't make sense." if the error changed meaning.

> "Reread this part. Something didn't sound right." if the error made the sentence grammatically incorrect.

> "Reread this part. Something didn't look right." if the error made sense but was read incorrectly.

If the error is corrected, praise the effort quickly and you move back into the reading. If the child still has difficulty, think about what prompts from earlier sections above might help the child search different kinds of information to help themselves.

Unsuccessful problem-solving after trying only one thing:

Sometimes students make errors because they become over-reliant on trying only one thing—sounding it out or looking at the picture or just rereading and repeating the same thing again. In these cases, the child has a vague sense that something isn't right but is only searching one kind of information. In such cases, the child needs a prompt to help them shift into looking at or integrating more kinds information. (This often happens when children have been recently taught to try a new strategy and for awhile, they then tend to over-use it.) Knowing how to apply the brakes when driving is an important strategic behavior but you wouldn't get to your destination by just applying that strategy!

There is a great deal of research to support the fact that proficient readers attempt to use multiple kinds of information simultaneously to problem-solve unknown words (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Gabriel, 2020; McGee, et al., 2015). Readers must rely on what is visually on the page—the letters and words because "reading begins with looking and ends when you stop looking" (Clay, 2016, p. 48). Since young children are still learning about letter combinations and sounds of the language, they cannot just sound words out. Alongside the visual print, readers also think about and consider what is happening in the story, what they know from their own life experiences or from other books, and/or rely on what is in the pictures to help them narrow down the possibilities to figure out a word. Additionally, readers look at words and use their in-depth knowledge and use of oral language (Duke et al., 2021; McKay et al., 2021; Tunmer, 1988; Verhoeven & Perfetti, 2008). Though they cannot yet verbalize the rules that govern grammar, by the age of 5, children are speaking using sophisticated grammatical conventions with ease.

This implicit knowledge of grammar—what words are likely to come after or before other words and what category of words can or cannot work in a sentence—also helps narrow down the possibilities or "choose-from" options. Any one of these kinds of information used alone would not make for effective or efficient reading; they are used in tandem by readers to problem-solve with lightning speed which gets faster and faster until it is automatized. It is important to note that readers who use multiple kinds of information are not guessing! Indeed, drawing from multiple kinds of information embedded in the text—as well as what each reader brings to the text (cultural and linguistic background, knowledge of the world, values, perspectives, and understandings)— to solve an unknown word is exactly what proficient readers do. Ultimately, reading is an orchestration of complex and multiple forms of visual/graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic information.

Always start by acknowledging the work the child is trying to do or the kind of information they are using and then prompt them to consider and add in other types of information that were neglected:

> "You reread to help yourself. Now let's look carefully at the word to see if there is something that could help."

> "You looked at the letters to help you. Now let's think about what's happening in this part, or about what the character might say."

> "Good! You've looked at the parts. Now start here and reread to see if that helps."

Prompts such as these send the child back to pick up addition information and to integrate multiple sources in tandem.

Successful problem-solving or self-correcting errors:

Sometimes a child pauses, makes an attempt and then figures the word out or makes an error and then corrects themselves. Though we often want to jump up and down in celebration or say, "Good job!" (and sometimes that IS exactly what you should do) but don't make that a habit. Every attempt the child makes, offers another opportunity for them to check and independently confirm their action. Our affirmations signals to the reader that they were right and there is no need to check themselves. Occasionally, after successful problem-solving or a self-correction, a better prompt is something simple like:

> "Were you right?"

When a child has noticed difficulty and initiated a solving attempt and successfully figured out the word, a simple prompt such as "Were you right?" goes a long way—it solidifies for the child that it is not only their job to problem-solve, but to monitor and check themselves afterward to preserve the author's message. The key to this prompt is to say it at times when the solving was successful and sometimes when it wasn't. If we only say this after an error, children perceptively recognize this question as a signal that something was wrong. In such cases, they may go back and fix something, but this doesn't mean learning has happened because *we monitored* and alerted them to the problem!

Prompts for After Reading

Coaches of professional sports figures can be seen helping grown adults enhance their performance before, during, and after a game, match, or competition. Coaches give pep-talks or offer last minute analysis before a game or match. During play, they can be seen yelling out, giving hand signals, or calling players together to give pointers to guide them to improve performance. Coaches also take opportunities to show strengths and weaknesses after the the performance is over. Great coaches look for "praise points"—a place or two from the game where the athlete's decision-making was particularly skillful to revisit and replay. Doing so helps future performance because it provides an opportunity to notice and reflect on effective actions. Likewise, coaches look for a "puzzle point"—a choice example of one place where something didn't go as planned to puzzle about what small change could have made a big difference. In our work with developing readers, the same coaching principle is important.

Praise points and puzzle points:

After reading, go back to one or two places to tell the reader or get them to tell you what worked by saying either:

> "There was a big trick right here. But you [name what the child did--looked at the parts and reread; OR you reread and thought about what would look right] and it worked!"

> "This part almost tricked you. What did you do to help yourself?"

Then move on to a little reflecting or teaching around a puzzle point. Unlike a sports analogy when the game is already over and it cannot be replayed, you are still have the book in front of you. Often, the very best move for a puzzle point is to go back to a page where the problem occurred and ask the child to reread. This brings the example back into the child's mind and one of two things will happen:

- While rereading, the child actually notices the problem and takes a step to solve it which has just turned into another praise point!
- While rereading, the child isn't able to notice or solve the problem alone and you have the opportunity to show or help them puzzle out what to do using any of the prompts from earlier.

More to Know and Do

Reading to and with children is one of the best ways to nurture and grow readers. The prompts above, based on the work of Marie Clay (2005, 2016), are not meant to be memorized or adhered to strictly—they are examples of language that has been shown to be helpful with readers (May et al., 2016). Measuring your language with prompts, varying to fit what you see the child doing, will make your reading endeavors powerful tools for enhancing the literate life every child deserves to live.

Click on the links to see a short video showing effective prompting in action, or for a list of prompts.

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Books for Developing Readers by Jeff: To see three collections of traditional fables from around the world, rewritten for developing readers and paired with non-fiction texts that explore connected concepts, visit Hameray Publishing at: https://www.hameraypublishing.com/collections/fables-and-the-real-world

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