# Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction xiii

1 Scaffolding: A Key to Reading Relationships 1
2 The Cues Readers Use 15
3 When and Where Teachers Scaffold 30
4 The Cues Teachers Use 43
5 How Teachers Scaffold Meaning and Syntax: Micro and Macro Processes 65
6 How Teachers Scaffold Graphophonics: A Micro Process 86
7 Pragmatic Relationships That Influence Cueing 104
8 Cue Use and Abuse 113
9 Into Fluency 126

Conclusion 147
References 149
Index 155
Chapter 1

Scaffolding: A Key to Reading Relationships

Making learning to read easy means ensuring cues at the time a child needs them, ensuring feedback of the kind required at the time it is required, providing encouragement when it is sought. Making learning to read easy requires an understanding of the reading process and of what the child is trying to do . . . Respond to what the child is trying to do . . . To my mind, this rule is basic.

FRANK SMITH,
ESSAYS INTO LITERACY

How many books have been written about relationships? Probably a ton. However, few have have focused on reading. Yet essentially, teacher-student reading relationships are secured by a similar ether as that which binds other lasting, caring, outside-school relationships.

Basically, teaching is a service profession. Those in a service generally serve, and in order to do that well we must be able to relate to others, in this case, our students. The teacher-student relationship is at the very core of teaching. It begins on the first day of school when our intentions lead the way. Sometimes, our main goal is to have our students pay attention during a period of instruction—one that finds us, their teachers, in front of the group entertaining, using a variety of media, varying our voice rhythms and tone, and targeting individual students for occasional response and accountability. Accordingly, after thirty years in front of every conceivable age group, I am a veteran in vaudeville. I know how to hook them, ignite them, and keep them paying attention—usually. However, entertaining is not real teaching.

Real teaching is an elbow-to-elbow, eye-to-eye thing. It’s a transaction—as opposed to an interaction—and it finds me responding as a guide by their side. It involves specific feedback, feedforward, and scaffolding. Sometimes it’s a
scheduled meeting, but mostly it’s done on-the-fly.

**Learning Is a Negotiated Process**

Although I feel like the ruler of the realm when I stand before my class, I can never know a student from that position. I can never know a child from the front of the room. Nor can I know children if I use scripted lessons. Knowing requires mindful, *individual* transactions. It requires relationship.

The essence of which I speak is the heart of all optimal teaching-learning events. When I was learning to do country painting, the instructor stood in the front of our group to model and explain every detail involved in constructing a pollywog, the fundamental stroke in that type of painting. She was comprehensive, organized, and articulate; and I paid attention. Honest! Yet, when I put the brush to the paper my polly didn’t wog. We’ve all been in situations like that, and we have a pretty good idea of what it takes to get our pollies to wog—and it isn’t any kind of scripted lesson or directions from a teacher’s manual.

It takes what my painting instructor offered me: *sensitive, knowledge-driven scaffolding.* She observed exactly where I was in the process, then she leaned over me, put her hand over mine—finger to finger—and collaboratively holding the brush, she guided my journey into the process. We did a few pollywogs with her leading; then, she gradually released her grasp, and little by little, let me lead more . . . and more . . . and more. That instructor is a real teacher—one from whom we can all learn.

There are some politicians with little or no teaching experience who would like to have us believe that teaching is a series of steps that involve doing something to children—steps that can be assessed using a multiple-choice, standardized-teaching test. Yet, were those politicians to actually find themselves in the classroom, they would quickly realize that every child is different and that teaching and learning are negotiated processes. This means we fulfill our instructional intentions by *doing with,* not *to.* And it is when we are elbow to elbow with kids that a touch of magic energizes the entire reading relationship.

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**What Is Scaffolding?**

Working one-on-one with readers is at the core of scaffolding. Anderson (Anderson, Armbruster, and Roe 1990) comprehensively explains this process for us. He says scaffolding consists of the support the coach provides as the students continue to practice. Scaffolding may be in the form of hints or suggestions. Or, the coach may perform part of the task students cannot yet manage on their own. Appropriate scaffolding requires accurate diagnosis of the students’ skill levels and the ability to provide just the right amount of support to enable the students to perform the target task. (p. 192)

Anderson defined this term in the ’90s, but Jerome Bruner (1973) actually coined it in the ’70s. Nonetheless, theories related to scaffolding span the centuries.

The common tie that binds all definitions is *adult assistance.* However, there is an important difference between meanings. That difference seems to be rooted in *whose intentions are being honored;* or, as Searle (1984) puts it: “Who’s Building Whose Building?” That is, essentially, whose task is it? Whose intentions are pulling the process forward? The teacher’s? The student’s? Both? Questions related to how, when, and how much scaffolding one should offer continually arise; and the answers lie somewhere between experience and wisdom.

Furthermore, scaffolding should continually change. It should be a gradual relinquishing of control of a specific behavior, a weaning off the expert. But when we’re needed, we’re there—elbow to elbow, sensitively offering the boost necessary to negotiate the difficulty, to move the learner forward—just as my painting instructor did for me.

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**From Complete Support to Learner Autonomy**

Scaffolders support learners through many levels during their novice-to-expert journey. Literacy experiences can fuel this journey. Their absence
can deter it (Neuman 1999). A scaffolding adult or other plays an important part in this process.

Adults Demonstrate, but Invite Babies In
Adults facilitate the young child’s learning through demonstrations of and immersion in the reading process while extending ongoing invitations to the learner to participate. Throughout this entire growth process adults revel in what the child can do, both with and without them. They give the young learners every possible chance to go it alone.

For instance, to involve infants in a triadic adult-child-book transaction, the little one may be invited to simply “read” the picture. Even before their first birthday, babies are invited and encouraged during book reading to “Look at the doggy.” Then later, we invite a more specific response, “Find the doggy in the picture.” Using a kind of cloze procedure, some moms invite their babies to fill in the blank the mother has just created. This often happens when books contain singsong patterns, animal sounds, rhymes, and other predictables: “Mother cat looked at her baby and the little kitten said, _______. What’d the kitty say? How’s kitty go?” invited a mother to her eighteen-month-old, as she carried out most of the reading process for the child, yet invited the baby in here and there.

Perhaps, then, it is the prosodies of the text that first draw the child in and nurture prediction in what seems like an alluring flow-forward. Moreover, just as babies in their first year learn oral language, so, too, does the young “reader” fall into the rhythms and melodies of the text and is swept up by them. This is the time when we hear children reciting lines or pages from their favorite book. It’s a time of melody and rhythm, a time of playing with language, a gentle scaffolding into books and reading.

Lap-Reading and Games Prepare Preschoolers for School Literacy
For many children, literacy experiences begin with lap-reading, a time when child and parent...
David Doake (1985) tells us that avid listening to stories in the secure and close proximity of a loved parent becomes a deeply rewarding, warm, human experience for the children and their parents. Through the sounds and rhythms of the rich and inviting language, through the interesting and colorful illustrations, through the constant stimulation of their receptive imaginations, and through the reliving of these experiences in anticipatory ways, the children soon begin to develop very high expectations for books and reading. (p. 85)

Indeed, it’s a wonderful experience for the young preschooler, sitting on an adult’s lap for a read-aloud. Research (Wells 1986; Holdaway 1979; Cambourne 1988) tells us that lap-reading experiences lay the foundation for later success in reading—later, when text’s rhythmic flow is embedded and the child begins to realize the connection between that which comes out of our mouths and the squiggles on the page; that is, he makes the connection between phonemic and orthographic patterns, sounds and letters. It seems that this new stage would invite new mediation tactics—ones more directed toward the print itself.

Upping the Ante
Most schools now expect that a child will have had such early literacy experiences prior to the time they enter kindergarten. Thus, we see teachers consistently upping the ante by demonstrating the finer details related to how reading and writing work. Teachers use both speech or gesture as they show novices, “This is a model of what adults do when they read.”

Scaffolding teachers invite novices to point to the words as the story is read. Or the teacher may ask them to provide a letter’s sound. Teachers focus on the meanings inherent in the text by inviting, “What do you think is going to happen next?” or “What does that mean?” Indeed, by the time children reach school, scaffolders expect the youngster to make closer connections to print forms. Then, as the child develops, the teacher offers more and more autonomy, carefully weaning him off teacher support while taking the young learner further into the world of literacy. A process such as this involves significant amounts of individual feedforward and feedback.

Feedforward and Feedback
Two seemingly opposite terms, feedforward and feedback, often emanate from the same kind of intention; that is, they are acts that support the

Writing Reciprocity: Shared Ownership
My four-year-old granddaughter, Delanie, began to make connections to print patterns in her environment. She noticed that most adults can write, and afterward, they can read that writing. Preschoolers notice that writing has letters—like the ones on the fridge, so they try out this writing behavior. That’s what Delanie was doing when she wrote NMNT and then asked, “What does this say?”

“It doesn’t really say anything, Sweetie Pie,” I responded.

“Why?” pressed Delanie.

“It needs some vowels in it, so I can say it,” I explained.

“What’s vowels?” Delanie asked.

I wrote the vowels across the top of the paper and told Delanie that one of them needed to go in the middle somewhere. So Delanie then wrote NEM, and asked, “What’s it say now?”

And I responded, “Hey-ey! Now it says NEM.” Delanie was satisfied, and didn’t want to investigate the fact that the word had only sounds, but no meaning. Instead, she just scurried off to play with her dolls. Yet, we have to wonder how she might have responded had it been a real word.

Nevertheless, this preschooler was curious and was able to grow forward in her literacy because an adult provided the sound-symbol feedback she wanted. The child initiated the act; the adult merely responded. Such shared ownership in early literacy experiences is a very important aspect of scaffolding.
reader through the process. Sometimes that support comes prior to a troublesome section of text (feedforward), while at other times instruction comes afterward (feedback). Both offer aid to the learner, yet there are inherent differences between the two.

**The Relationship Between Feedback and Errors**

Feedback in the reading realm is an after-the-fact event that involves responding to errors made by the reader, ones that the teacher corrects. Yet, the teacher does not actually use the situation to teach. For example, Ann, a first grader, reads, “The doll is in bad,” to which the teacher feeds back or corrects, “Bed, not bad.”

Although feedback in a reading relationship is similar to that of the painting relationship I experienced, it is also very different. The tools, the texts, and the processes call for a distinct set of scaffolding maneuvers in each. In reading, some educators would call these scaffolding maneuvers corrective feedback; that is, responses made by the teacher to correct an error made by the student (Jenkins and Larson 1979). This kind of feedback has also been called a terminal intervention, because it involves a brief, one-way, teacher-to-student interaction (Anderson, Evertson, and Brophy 1979; Chinn et al. 1993). There is not an explanation, only a correction.

Researchers, to a lesser extent, have also studied sustaining or process feedback, which involves lengthier interactions between student and teacher, as opposed to those brief, corrective, right-answer responses (Anderson, Armbruster, and Roe 1990). Sustaining feedback occurs during reading when teachers offer a suggestion, provide a pathway to follow, ask a brief question, explain an uncommon term, or any number of other interventions. This lengthier response then differs from the previous corrective feedback.

When using sustaining feedback the teacher does not simply correct or tell unknown words, but instead, gives the reader a hint or strategy to help him discover pathways to meaning and fluency. The essence of this teacher-student interaction, then, models and teaches the use of strategies within the reading act. Research demonstrates “that children’s year-to-year growth in reading is greater when oral reading errors are followed with ‘sustaining feedback’ rather than ‘terminal feedback’” (Anderson, Armbruster, and Roe 1990, p. 171). Yet some researchers contend that sustaining feedback is seldom used (Meyer 1985; McCoy and Pany 1986; Anderson, Armbruster, and Roe 1990).

Most past research was not carried out in beginning-reader classrooms, such as kindergarten and first grade. Instead, researchers investigated older struggling students in other settings, such as reading clinics or special education classrooms. Maybe my observations produced different results because they occurred during the normal course of events in regular primary classrooms. As I videotaped over the shoulders of teacher-student dyads, I found there was plenty of sustaining feedback going on in first grade. As a matter of fact, the day was full of it!

**Scaffolding: An All-Encompassing Term**

Connotations around the term feedback do not seem to allow for all scaffolding possibilities. As we transact elbow-to-elbow with kids, we teachers open not only our minds, but also our hearts to the full picture of possibilities. Indeed, we emulate my painting instructor, assuming a sensitive, more proactive perspective; that is, we learn to dance with learners in a feedback-feedforward kind of cha-cha. In order to do this successfully, we have to possess an intimate knowledge of the reading process—a mind perspective; but we also have to know the whole child in order to develop an essential heart sensitivity. We should be aware of each reader’s likes and dislikes, abilities and inabilities, background and lack thereof, as well as the text being used. This enables us to catch the beginner before he falls, to anticipate an error by feeling, by sensing, a slight nuance of change in the child’s voice tone and tempo, gestures, and breathing, while at the same time responding with a scaffold that carries that young novice over the hump, free of scars and bruises.

It seems more reasonable, therefore, to use Bruner’s term, scaffolding, than to use feedback or feedforward, particularly because as we move into the nuts and bolts of this process, it is sometimes difficult to discern the two. However, another term that is synonymous with scaffolding is mediating; and, thus, that term will also be useful here.
Scaffolding Cues That Teachers Use

Actors are shown cue cards when they forget a line. Football players are cued by the coach to perform certain plays or maneuvers. And novice readers are cued by teachers to help them understand the reading process. In this text, I use the term cueing to signify teacher scaffolding acts—ones that give the reader a sign, a cue—that will hopefully move the learner forward, through and beyond a challenging section of text.

Two Cueing Channels
Teachers cue readers through primarily two channels. They cue through gestural behaviors, such as pointing, smiling, turning a page, patting a hand, or changing voice tone. They also cue through spoken scaffolds when they tell the child a word, offer him a beginning sound, read an entire sentence, or issue praise and affirmation. The myriad cues teachers use and their variety of purposes are thoroughly explained in later chapters.

Effective and Ineffective Cues
Some teacher cues are effective and should be readily used. Others are ineffective and should not be used—even though they sometimes are. Unfortunately, I myself repeatedly used some of those ineffective cues—until this investigation, that is. It is indeed fortunate that we can learn to put aside such ineffective response habits.

Teachers scaffolding in a regular classroom setting need to know what works. They also need to know what does not work, so they can discontinue its use. The following chapters, which describe this, gather their grist from observations within such regular classroom settings.

The Difference Between Preword Readers, Word Readers, and Fluent Readers

When a child first approaches the printed page, he may not even know that it is the print that carries the message. These are the children who announce, “I can read with my eyes closed!” That is, they open the book and repeat it in the manner in which they heard it read to them. They’ve memorized it! Such “reading-like behaviors” (Holdaway 1979) have been called talking like a book (Clay 1979), pretend-reading (Ehri and Sweet 1991), and reenactment (Holdaway 1979), and are often the first identifiable literacy behaviors. During this preword period, children do not even realize that the words issuing from the reader’s mouth have something to do with the letters on the page. And even when they do make the connection between speech and the page’s print, it is generally a tacit one.

Scaffolders lead preword readers toward a more explicit understanding of the page’s microcosms of graphic symbols through pointing behaviors, ones that mark where the reader is looking. Yet even then it is quite some time before children understand how print works.

Pretend-Reading
Indeed, many preword readers know that the alphabet symbols on the page carry the message, but they have no understanding of how that print works, that is, how to decode print. For instance, when my grandson, Cameron, was twenty months old, he reenacted the book Freight Train (Crews 1978). He began by sliding his hand under the print in the title from right to left, not left to right. He knew where the title was, and he knew what the title was; however, he did not understand how print works. At that time, he appeared to have little awareness of English orthography’s directionality. He had merely reproduced the behaviors of his mother, pretending to read by doing what he thought she was doing. But Cameron was still a preword reader at that time.

Fingerslide-Reading
When Cameron began to understand that reading has a quality of directionality he moved further into the process and began to use fingerslide-reading along with correct directionality; that is, he slid his finger under each line, just as he saw his mom do, from left to right. Yet, it was some time before Cameron was able to match each spoken word to its print partner on the page. For that, he had to have some understanding of wordness. That is, left-to-right fingerslide-readers must eventually also understand that their spoken words also have a printmatch. Scaffolders help them notice how those empty spaces, or junctures, between groups of letters mark the beginnings and endings of
words. Once they begin to notice how the letters are word-grouped on a page, preword readers transition into a greater focus on words. Even so, their printmatch behaviors are usually inconsistent for quite some time. That is, transitioning novices tend to drop back into pretend-reading at times, especially when they become tired or pressured.

**Fingerpoint-Reading**
The next stage can be called *fingerpoint-reading* (Ehri and Sweet 1991), which requires a leap on the developmental ladder—one that can only happen after a novice notices that the letters on the page are indeed printed in groups set off by spaces. Even then, a child’s exact understanding of the process is unpredictable because word units are not as noticeable in speech as in print; that is, we do not pause between words when we talk. Furthermore, in speech it’s difficult to discern a syllable from a word, so transitioning novices may not understand that *once upon a time* is four words. Unable to connect concrete referents to the individual words in this abstract utterance, young children assume it is one word: “wunsaponatim” (which is exactly why novice writers in my classroom encoded it in a similar fashion in their journals year after year).

**Phonemic Awareness and Printmatch**
As *speech-to-print awareness* develops, transitioning readers come to understand the symbiotic relationship between writing and speech; that is, readers begin to learn where words are segmented in speech *at the same time* that they are learning about what words look like in print, and vice versa. As a matter of fact, Adams found that “training phonemic awareness produced little reading benefit unless children were also taught the printed letters by which each phoneme was represented” (1990, p. 54). Others have also researched this and agree that sounds should not be taught separately from letters (Krashen 2001b; Bus and van Ijzendoorn 1999; National Reading Panel 1999). It comes as no surprise, then, that research shows “explicit awareness of word in written language precede[s] explicit awareness of word in spoken language” (Roberts 1992, p. 135). Undoubtedly, the printed page itself scaffolds and grounds wordness. Thus, separating spoken words or sounds from their printmates by implementing phonemic awareness drills makes little sense because, in reading, *words and sounds are a package deal.*

This would indicate that reading scaffolding behaviors should involve exposure to print (Adams 1990; Lomax and McGee 1987; Ehri 1976). Kids need to be read to and to hang out with books in order to develop the underpinnings of the process (Krashen 1993; Neumann 1999). And they need scaffolders to answer their questions and guide their efforts. Otherwise, literacy takes longer.

**A Package Deal: Sounds and Symbols**
Even adults can experience childlike speech-to-print ambiguities when becoming literate in a foreign language. For they, too, find it difficult to understand where one word ends and another begins, unless they are shown it in print. Print helps clear up confusions—and in the thirty years that I spent teaching kids to read, I did not waste my time on oral exercises—that is, phonemic awareness that had young learners repeating my nonsense syllables. Why focus only on oral language when we have print to complement and support it? And it is actually quite amazing to see how quickly youngsters come to understand word junctures—especially considering how

*Linda points to the words to scaffold a novice.*
When Reading Begins

When Reading Begins

When Reading Begins

rapidly we speak and also how we inarticulately meld one spoken word to another.

Scaffolders need to show learners where to find a word’s printmatch. Pointing to words helps clear up those confusions. Once learners begin to replicate their scaffolders’ behaviors and can match speech with print, they have reached a new plateau. Yet some children who do give up fingerpoint-reading replace it with other, more novel pointing behaviors.

Voicepointing and Headpointing
Marie Clay (1979) talks about novices who exhibit a kind of reading she calls voicepointing. Some kids who are not ready to give up fingerpointing, replace it with voicepointing. As they focus on that one-to-one word match, they sound more like counters than readers, “1! 2! 3! 4!”

“The! boy! ran! to! his! mother!”

Each word is thrust out, like Krispee-Kremes popping from the donut machine into the boiling tub of oil below. The reading may be fast, but each word sounds the same. Identical inflection. Identical pacing. Mechanical. That’s voicepointing.

Sometimes readers keep time with their heads, thereby substituting headpointing for fingerpointing. No kidding! Lots of novices try out headpointing for a while. Afraid of losing his place, a novice figuratively sits on his hands, but nods his head for each word. Headpointers, who have good word recognition and can therefore read very fast, resemble those nodding birds that drivers place in car windows—and some novices peck as though they are hungry woodpeckers! So indeed they are reading with speed, yet they certainly do not sound fluent!

Developing a Sight Vocabulary
As students begin to look more closely at individual words, they start to notice likenesses and differences between words. They realize that some words are long and some are short, some have tall letters and others have mostly short letters. They can find look-alike words. They begin to identify grouped letters, especially nouns, such as zoo, dog, and mommy.

Their environment helps scaffold them forward as they find high-frequency words in books, on word walls, and in myriad places at home and in school. The more they see the same words, the more rapidly they become theirs. Learners then begin to use this new vocabulary in their writing because they now remember how some words are composed. It is at that time that novices are on their way to accumulating a sound sight vocabulary that will eventually provide grist for letter-sound patterns.

The more children read, the faster they accrue vocabulary (Adams 1990), and the more comfortable they become with the process. Their knowledge of literacy expands and each reading experience becomes more predictable for them, more like others they’ve already had. Before long, the reader is sliding right into fluency.

Fluent Reading
Sometimes the journey from a mere awareness of words (being able to point to each word as the teacher reads aloud) to an accumulated sight vocabulary (an actual remembered visual image of particular words) and decoding (using cues to identify unknown words) and on into fluency (when word recognition is automatic) can take many months or even years. Readers transitioning into fluency learn to intone whole phrases at a time; they do not read haltingly or word by word, as novice readers do. And they do not have to point to the words. When reading text at their own instructional level, they slide along at an even pace because their sight vocabulary is large and they possess a number of strategies that help to keep them going. Unlike the word-by-word fingerpoint readers, fluent readers barely glance at most common words and, according to eye movement research, even skip highly predictable words (Paulson and Freeman 2003).

Students Take Ownership of Modeled Skills and Strategies
Of course, there are times when readers encounter a challenging section of text, but cannot receive specific instruction or support from a teacher. In such instances, readers will then need to independently use previously acquired skills and strategies to—correctly or incorrectly—move through troublesome spots. Novices can independently use decoding strategies when they have teachers who take a moment here or there to show them how it’s done; that is, teachers who
demonstrate how to jump the hurdles—teachers who use a variety of cues as models to emulate. Such teacher scaffolding is optimal when the text used is somewhat challenging, but just right for that particular child. Therefore, every reading relationship is unique, and will differ depending upon the text, the reader, and the scaffolder.

### How Does Scaffolding Look and Sound for Beginners?

Preword readers may be able to slide through the words and reproduce a patterned text after someone has read it to them, but if they are unable to match spoken words with their print partners, they would still be considered preword readers. That is, they are unable to accurately read an *unrehearsed* text alone. These children do not discern the fundamental differences between and among words.

To support children having little or no experience with books, the mediator usually reads the text aloud while inviting the youngster to “read” the pictures, guess what might happen next, turn the pages, and such. These young reproducers can then indeed navigate that book autonomously; however, they will reenact the text from memory using its illustrations and language patterns for support, not the words.

Once preword readers begin to transition toward word reading, the scaffolding changes. And it continues to change as the reader changes. Let’s visit a few scaffolders and see how each reading relationship differs.

#### Scaffolding Preword Reader, Cameron: Age Twenty Months

Earlier, I introduced preword reader Cameron, who was reenacting one of his then favorite books, *Freight Train.* Cameron’s mom had read and reread that book many, many times to her son. She herself had it memorized! Again and again, she and Cameron had sat on the couch connected by the book, mom holding the left page and Cameron holding and turning the right. As Mom read, she used finger-sliding to show Cameron where she was reading and the *direction* in which print flows. She always read the title, along with the author and illustrator. Consequently, when Cameron reenacted the book, he also included the titles, authors, and illustrators of texts—on both the cover and the title page. And although Cameron slid his own finger backward through the lines of print, his mom honored those approximations.

When Cameron was able to remember a good bit of the book, Mom invited him to read it. And when this preword reader miscalled the train car’s color, Mom gave corrective feedback.

> “Is that yellow? It’s orange!” Mom corrected.

This dyad also asked questions of each other. Mom asked, “What color is that car?” Cameron asked, “What’s this says?” pointing at the publishing company information that his mom had skipped. Together they danced through the pages, trading the reading and responding leads back and forth in a flowing relationship. In so doing, Cameron was becoming very familiar and confident with the world of print. It was a rewarding and comfortable time for both.

#### Scaffolding Preword Transition Reader, Sean: Age Six Years

Another child, who is more experienced in the process, may be ready for a greater focus on the print itself. Teachers do continue to demonstrate, reading for kids who are beginning to word-match; and, as a matter of fact, they invite them into many of the same responses that the less experienced Cameron had with his mom.

Teachers would, however, up the ante by expecting a transition reader to read using *both* the graphics or words on the page and the illustrations. In other words, unlike Cameron, this transition reader stands at the doorway of decoding. He may or may not associate sounds with letters, but he is beginning to understand wordness; that is, he notices word junctures and the way in which all words have a particular shape or structure.

Let’s look at a scaffolding session I had with Sean, a novice six-year-old, who is beginning to match speech to print; in other words, he notices the junctures and also some of the ways in which words differ. As a school literacy specialist, I captured this experience on the pages of my classroom journal.

*My Journal Entry: Scaffolding Sean*

Students were meandering in after lunch, trying to find the books they would read during sustained silent reading (SSR), when I called to
Sean and invited, “Hey, Sean, want to read a book with me?” The tiny towhead, receiving my invitation in a positive light, ambled over and sat on my lap with his well-rehearsed book, The Jigaree (Cowley 1986). After he finished this personal, memorized favorite, I extended another invitation.

“Let’s read a new one this time, Sean,” I encouraged, as I rummaged through the stack of books I had carried with me. “How about this one?” I said, holding up another more challenging, yet patterned, text.

“I can’t read that,” objected the little blond cherub, as he shied away from me.

“Then, let me read it to you first,” I invited, “It’s about twins.” Those few words seemed to have reestablished the reading relationship, because Sean then sauntered over my way, demonstrating more interest. He sidled up beside me as we settled into a comfortable position together on the corner carpet while the rest of the class finished their own book searches.

When I picked up that new book I had a good hunch that Sean could not yet read it. But I also knew that he now had speech-to-print, so I decided that if I first read this minimal-word, patterned text to him, pointing to the words, making it fun, he might catch the book’s patterns and rhythms enough to join me on the second time through. And that is just what he did! However, as we broached the halfway point and I could feel his confidence developing, I began to fade in and out as needed. We traded off on the pointing, too. The third time through he played the part that I had played the second time through. That is, he did most of the reading and I came in only if he needed me. Throughout this process I applauded his efforts, celebrating, “Look at how you can read this now! That’s probably because it’s such a fun book!”

Scaffolding Considerations for Transitioning Readers

Sean was just getting used to the world of print, so I needed to first establish some kind of confident relationship between the child, the book, and myself. I knew I had to do the reading for him. But because we were using a just-right text for this reader, he modeled my reading and pointing within just a few minutes. In the days that followed, I would stop by Sean’s table to repeat that process; but I would also keep tabs on his progress by inviting this transitioning reader, who was on the threshold of word-matching, to point to particular words. I needed to know if he was focusing on each word’s distinctive features. I also asked him to tell me about the book, because I needed to know if he was making meaning. And I asked him to read his favorite page because I wanted to know if he was interested.

All of this is the scaffolding I would use with a child who is at the doorstep of decoding. When Sean becomes a confident novice reader, I will invite him into more autonomy in the reading process, just as Kara does with her novice reader in the example that follows.

Scaffolding Novice Reader, Serita: Age Seven

Serita is a novice reader. She can match speech to print and is becoming more independent. Yet she still needs help with cues and strategies.

In the following, first-grade teacher Kara mediates Serita through a patterned text called My Messy Room. The reader has stopped mid-sentence, attempting to sound through the word socks, but seems confused. Consider everything Kara does and says to support this novice through the sentence “I like socks on my chair.”

Kara begins by offering an open strategy invitation:

TEACHER: If sounds aren’t working, let’s try something else. (brings up her left hand, which is on the floor between the two, to grasp the corner of the book’s page) Let’s jump right over it, (at the same time makes a quick sign with her left hand that slices through the air, inferring a fast movement forward—a jump—then immediately moves her hand to the beginning of the sentence, pointing to the first word and then rereads) “I like blank—(skips right over the word socks and continues to point to each of the following words, on my chair; however, she does not use speech to accompany this pointing, but merely fingerslides to the end of the sentence)

When this teacher said “blank,” she used an upward pitch that signaled an invitation to participate. Therefore, without missing a beat, the reader took over, right after “blank,” where the
teacher had orally left off. The reader was then led (through teacher gesture only) to reread and supply the unknown word. That is, the teacher moved her finger from the end of the sentence, back to its beginning, knowing full well that as she slid forward she would pull the reader along with her. And she did.

When an adult scaffolds in mindful ways that consider a reader’s specific needs, learning often takes place. Kara offered this child a variety of cues and strategies as she scaffolded the reader through the text using both gestural and spoken cues. Kara believed that if she mindfully guided her novice readers through text, showing them how the process works, they would soon be able to do it without her. And indeed, she was correct.

How Does Scaffolding Look and Sound for Fluent Readers?

That year, Kara led many of her students into fluency. Once they achieved that ability, she allowed them far more autonomy. As a matter of fact, the first thing she did when she sat down beside a fluent reader was to place her palm under her chin with her elbow resting on the table in a relaxed, somewhat nonparticipatory gesture.

When Kara’s fluent reader hesitated on an unknown name, Kara did not gesture. First, she waited, allowing the reader to use decoding strategies. But after a few seconds, when the fluent reader demonstrated no evident strategy, Kara suggested one, such as “What if you broke it up?” The reader did then break it up, and as a consequence, decoded the word and read on. Kara did not use corrective feedback. She used sustaining feedback, which allowed the reader more autonomy.

For her fluent readers, Kara uses minimal cues, many of which are gestural or open-ended invitations that support a fluent, uninterrupted journey through text. On the other hand, Lani’s fluent reader was so fluent that Lani focused primarily on comprehension strategies and only occasionally scaffolded fluency. Each scaffolding situation differs, because every reading relationship is different. It is of utmost importance that teachers know their students, their texts, and their craft.

Using a Text That Scaffolds Novice Readers

A significant part of a reading relationship involves the text being read. Text is what makes it a triadic transaction—a part that helps keep each transaction vital and unique. Any one text can present myriad variables that influence a reading relationship. From topic to readability to the kind of print on the page, as well as dozens of other variables, texts play an influential part in any reading relationship.

Books They Can Read with Their Eyes Shut

Teachers use highly predictable books with pre-word and transitioning students. They want to make certain that the text is as supportive as possible, so they select books that have lots of rhyme, rhythm, and consistent patterns—books that are so predictable they can easily be memorized. And that is just what happens. It is during this period that we receive notes from parents that say, “Dear Mrs. Cole, Mary brought her book home to read. She did not really read it. She has it memorized.”

We still love to tell the story of the delightfully chatty little first grader from Linda’s room who visited her older sister’s teacher in early September. When the teacher asked if she had learned to read yet, the child responded, “Oh, yes! I can even read with my eyes shut! Wanta see?” She then began reciting the book—with eyes closed, of course.

It’s quite obvious that this child’s scaffolding support would be very different from that of a reader who possessed knowledge of wordness and a sight vocabulary. It’s also obvious that the text we’d want to use would be different. It is easy-to-remember, minimal-print, patterned texts that we so often use with beginning readers, because they offer far more predictability than a text with no rhythm, rhyme, or repetition. In other words, sometimes a text itself scaffolds readers with its predictable structures. Yet this is what we want for beginners. We want them to feel as safe as possible, to enjoy the act, to feel in control. It is within that safe environment that they will learn, and it also offers the best circumstances for scaffolding.

Once novices begin to understand how print works, we need to up the text ante. We then
move to texts whose patterns are not as predictable and ones that have more print on the page.

**Just-Right Texts**

A *just-right text* aligns with a reader’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978); that is, it is just challenging enough to allow for scaffolding that will move that reader on to the next rung on the developmental ladder. This means that the book should contain some challenging aspects, such as vocabulary—tricky parts that could be made easier to circumnavigate with adult assistance. Optimally, the novice reader should encounter around five to ten challenging spots or words within a hundred-word section of text. Some call this the child’s *instructional level* (Fountas and Pinnell 1996).

Sometimes, when I do not know a reader well, I must try two or three books before locating a just-right book. A too-difficult book would frustrate, while a too-easy book would provide no challenging or scaffolding opportunities. That is why the text used will definitely influence the reading relationship. Just right always depends on the individual child. Just right for one reader will not be just right for another. We know what is optimal by listening to a child read, and we will never know whether a book is just right for a particular child unless we listen to that child read that particular book. It always boils down to one child, one teacher, one book: the optimal reading relationship for a novice.

**The Decodable Text Genre**

Those who see phonics as the sine qua non of beginning reading, construct *decodable texts* and nonsense-word tests to accompany them and validate their use. Whereas real authors are inspired by ideas that they capture in writing, decodable texts are constructed using lists of words and a computer. The words precede the idea. Some of these books, therefore, sound very strange and contrived, which prompts us to wonder who would write something like that. And that is exactly what some of my first graders wondered when they came upon some decodable texts in the back recesses of our room. They became intrigued trying to understand the intention of the authors who wrote the Barnhart linguistic readers (the Nan-can-fan-Dan books).

Yet because those kids saw the world as a meaningful place, they kept trying to attach meaning to that textual nonsense!

We had all kinds of old and donated books in our class library, and that small set of readers soon became grist for multiple wonders, as well as some tentative answers. For instance, one day during SSR, Shanasti motioned me over and, wondering about the page before him, whispered, “Mrs. Cole, do you think the author’s trying to write a new kind of poetry?”

Kids continually reach to make sense of their worlds—whether or not they abide in nonsense. They, like Shanasti, will even make sense of our nonsense! But why would we ever want to start kids out on nonsense?

**No Research Supports Use of Decodable Text**

While we’re on the topic of decodable text, I feel compelled to mention that although some profess it as the just-right recipe for beginning reading, there is absolutely *no research* that substantiates the use of this genre. Yet decodable text, along with all of its boring rules and regulations, seems to have become a favorite of publishing companies and mainstay for government mandates.

The entire fiasco is based on nonsense—even the supposed research. The National Reading Panel (1999) touted studies that measured reading ability through each student’s decoding of nonsense words, that is, words without meanings (for example, *pim* and *gan*). But could those students actually read and comprehend authentic, unrehearsed text—real books? Again, we do not know. We only know that they could match sounds to letters. Trained parrots can also do this!

For more information on this, please see Elaine Garan’s seminal work investigating the National Reading Panel’s research, *Resisting Reading Mandates: How to Triumph with the Truth* (2002). Then ask districts and companies who are using decodable texts—and also the federal government: Where is the research supporting this? Will kids really enjoy a steady diet of these textual manipulations? Can kids even make sense of them? Are they fun? Interesting?
I have an idea. Rather than structuring texts by chopping them into those senseless decodable pieces, why don’t we scaffolders simply adjust our support, but keep the text meaningful?

Grade-Level Mediation Differences

Viewing my first set of scaffolding videos, which were collected from grades K–2, I observed a remarkable difference in mediation tactics among grade levels. The most involved sustaining teacher mediation seemed to be offered primarily to younger or less capable students. When a kindergartner experienced some confusion within the reading process, the teacher would waltz right through with the child, sometimes interrupting after an error was made, but at other times saving the child before he even stumbled.

For example, when one little boy read, “Do you like animals?” instead of “Do you like elephants?” the teacher retroactively mediated, “Oh, does that look like animals?” (pointing to the word).

“It’s a long word like animals, but it doesn’t start the same way,” she explained, trying to focus the kindergartner on the word’s configuration and initial sound.

But then, as the child began again, “Do you like—” the teacher joined right in with the reader to cue in a proactive manner, “El—” to which the child responded, “Elephants!”

“Uh-huh,” reinforced the teacher.

On the other hand, the second-grade students most often received only brief, corrective feedback, that is, their teachers corrected after an error. For instance, when a second grader read, “sticky” for “sickly” the teacher used retroactive feedback to supply the correct word. Another teacher of second grade allowed the youngster to finish the paragraph after a miscue. She then went back to correct the miscued part. Sustaining feedback was seldom used.

This reliance on corrective feedback seemed to be age specific, because it rarely occurred in kindergarten and first grade. Thus, it was during those first days of my initial study that I began to realize the differences between the ways in which teachers scaffold novices and the ways in which they scaffold more fluent readers.

Another noticeable difference was in the tone of each event. At the kindergarten level there seemed to be more celebration of success. The event was reminiscent of the way that babies learn oral language. These teachers seem to convey an abundance of reassurance, response, and lightheartedness. The children, in turn, mirrored their teachers’ behaviors; that is, they were not as serious and appeared to be having fun (however, this was before No Child Left Behind with its higher levels of kindergarten accountability). On one delightful tape, a little girl stopped mid-sentence to say, “I’m a monkey, too!” I still have to smile just thinking about it.

So it is that teachers scaffold novices more often. They sometimes catch a reader before she falls, and sometimes come in afterward to help pick up the pieces and put them together again. Yet, the scaffolding usually occurs in one seamless flow—a dancing dyad with each partner intuitively accommodating and responding to the other. Not all reading relationships are smooth-flowing, but the ones that are trade leads like a seamless and sensitive ballet.

Reading Relationships, a Key to Learning

This chapter has described both the changes that occur in early literacy development as well as the evolving act of scaffolding that accompanies those changes. Responding to such change supports and nurtures a reading relationship. Teachers need to read their students’ cues as well as the text being used. Students read the teacher’s feedback and feedforward cues as well as the text they are using. Optimally, such reading relationships will ignite the flames of learning.

In this chapter I define teacher scaffolding, but to a great extent, I have circumvented the system of cues that readers themselves use to move through text. These are exceedingly important, because they are also related to the cues the teacher provides in her scaffolding. Therefore, in Chapter 2 we investigate those cues that all readers use as they navigate text.
Grist for Discussion

The following has happened to the majority of primary teachers: New student Marita was assigned to your room just three short weeks ago. It’s been a busy time since she arrived, what with school pictures, snowstorm, and play practice. For no reason that you know of, Marita’s mom makes an appointment to come in and “discuss something with you.” This mom wears a look of concern as she enters the room and sits down across from you at a low table. After the usual amenities, Marita’s mom says, “Marita is bringing books home. She seems to love them, but I don’t think she’s actually reading them. She has them all memorized. I’m worried she is going to fail because she can’t read. She’s faking.”

What would you tell Marita’s mom?
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