When Reading Begins

The Teacher’s Role in Decoding, Comprehension, and Fluency

Ardith Davis Cole
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How Teachers Scaffold Meaning and Syntax: Micro and Macro Processes

If reading is about mind journeys, teaching reading is about outfitting the travelers, modeling how to use the map, demonstrating the key and the legend, supporting the travelers as they lose their way and take circuitous routes, until, ultimately, it’s the child and the map together and they are off on their own.

ELLIN KEENE AND SUSAN ZIMMERMAN, MOSAIC OF THOUGHT: TEACHING COMPREHENSION IN READER’S WORKSHOP

After working with children for over three decades, I have many delightful stories about how easily kids can be confused by words, sounds, and meanings. One time Anthony ran up to me, gave my jacket several hard tugs and exclaimed, “Mrs. Cole! Mrs. Cole! Dierdra is writin’ in the butter!”

“Butter?” I pondered aloud.

“Yes! Look! Look!” he said as he tugged me across the room. “She’s doin’ what you said not to do. She’s writin’ in the butter!”

After teachers work with kids for many years, we can usually untangle these confounding moments. But this one had me baffled. So I continued to be led by Anthony until we finally came to Dierdra, who just seemed to be innocently writing in her journal—and there were no dairy products around.

Yet, Anthony continued to complain. Finally, frustrated because I remained complacent about the unknown misdemeanor of Dierdra, he jabbed his finger to a spot on her journal page.

The margin! Dierdra had written in the margin, not the margarine! And certainly not the butter!
That week I had been focusing these novice first graders on spacing and neatness and had mentioned the margins for about three seconds. Nevertheless, Anthony picked up on it, and had become our room’s “margarine” policeman.

Another common kindergarten and first-grade faux pas can be seen in this word: wunsaponatim. About eight out of ten novices who encode once upon a time using phonetics, do it in a similar fashion (which I actually applaud for its close letter-sound correlations). How are they to know it is actually four words! It is only after I show them the four words, pointing to each, that they exclaim, “Oh-h-h-h!” The meaning of that abstract phrase eluded them, thus, the spelling did, too.

Children who have only been on the face of this earth for six years have many confusing moments in literacy. That is actually part of the joy of teaching first grade; that naivete, that innocence, is a quality I so enjoy and cherish. But I always try to embed the curriculum and the day with meaning, because without it, we all get lost in the butter.

Considering the importance of meaning in general, semantic-syntactic (S-S) cues remain utmost in importance, because it is they that are central to the entire literacy process. After all, they help everything else to make sense, and when meaning breaks down, everything else does, too.

Macro and Micro Processes: Interdependent Meaning Makers

This chapter will focus on both the micro processes, which include word decoding, and the macro processes, which include comprehension strategies. Meaning and syntax are vested in both of these interdependent processes. While the micro processes involve, primarily, word units and local cues, the macro processes involve, primarily, larger syntactic units with their more global meanings. Readers reach for semantic matches in micro processing; they reach for comprehension in macro processing. Obviously, however, each influences the other.

Nevertheless, focusing primarily on sounds and words will steal memory space from the macro meanings, and focusing primarily on larger chunks of texts containing numerous miscues will confuse the entire process. Novices need to get good at both!

Meaning’s Relationship to Fluency

Don Holdaway (1979) suggests that “The major reason why predictive and meaning-oriented drives must operate at the center of any efficient strategy is that they provide the necessary conditions for fast automatic performance” (p. 99). When the flow of words slows or takes on a different tempo or timbre, the reader is sending a metamessage to the listener, “This isn’t making sense.” It’s like a song being sung slightly off-key—we notice it immediately and want to do something about it. And when the off-key reader was a novice, teachers did tend to rescue fluency.

In this regard, I was fascinated by the astute responses of the teachers I watched. Even when kids were fairly fluent, teachers seemed to notice almost imperceptible changes in their students’ fluency patterns. The child may have appeared confused for only a second, or maybe the reader just altered his pace a tiny bit, or he changed his intonation pattern. Regardless, all teachers noticed these nuances, and their gestural behaviors told me they were ready to scaffold, if needed.

As Kara watched her video footage, she asked that it be stopped momentarily at a point where she was explaining a bit of the story to her reader. She focused my attention, pointing out, “There’s another cue . . . I just didn’t want her comprehension to break down.” What Kara helps us to see here is how she attempted to rescue a young reader’s (S-S) flow before that child experienced failure. Julie, Lani, and Hannah also did this on occasion. They followed their instinctual sense to support, to rescue dysfluency or a miscue before it occurred.

When I discussed this with the teachers themselves they said that they know when a child “isn’t getting the meaning.” Most obvious to them was that the reader’s fluency starts to break down. Thus, fluency affects meaning and meaning affects fluency, and both affect scaffolding. The relationships are close ones.
When a Slower Pace Actually Enhances Comprehension

The strategies the reader uses affect meaning perhaps more than the pace at which he reads. We all know that when we are reading and come upon a strange term or concept, we slow down, think about it, maybe reread, or we read on and then return. During such meaning-gathering periods, we do not sound very fluent; however, we are interrupting our fluency for a very good reason, that is, to sustain meaning.

Whereas, if we did not understand and kept going at that same steady pace, we’d sound good, but meaning would no doubt suffer. In that case, implementing strategies that make us sound less fluent can actually aid our comprehension, because almost all readers slow down to implement time-consuming strategies when they come upon a nonmeaningful section of text. This means that several readers could read the same material at different rates, yet still comprehend in a similar fashion.

Yet, although slowing down to implement a strategy can support comprehension, it can also indicate to a scaffolder that the reader is experiencing some kind of trouble. And when that reader is a novice, it might be a good time for the teacher to jump in and rescue meaning or fluency or both—a decision that is not always an easy one to make.

Why Teachers Enter to Save Fluency for Novices

I watched Jane make the decision to jump in when she noticed a change in her novice’s inflection. It was only a nuance of difference, but Jane noticed and accommodated. Afterward, Jane and I watched a segment of the video together. We heard her novice stumble, after which an immediate inflection and intonation change occurred. Almost synchronistically, we heard Jane begin to read along with her novice reader.

As we were watching the event via video, Jane pressed Pause and commented to me, “I don’t know if he’s enjoying this right now. Do you think he’s enjoying it?”

Instead of answering her question, I asked her another, “Is that why you’re reading with him now?”

“Yeah,” agreed Jane. “I think he’s getting frustrated and isn’t getting it.” Jane sensed her reader’s meaning might be slipping—along with his patience—so she saved him. She understood that fluency and meaning are directly related, and that if the fluency was slipping, then meaning probably was also. Nevertheless, maybe Jane would have waited were it not for her sensing a change in reader attitude.

Wait Time: A Sensitive Scaffolding Decision

Wait time varies, because some transitioning preword readers need lots of support, that is, a guide by their side catching them before they fall. But if we do not give novices some wait time, how will they learn to use strategies, to correct their miscues, to go it alone?

Teachers respond in different ways to wait time. Instead of interrupting, many wait until the page is about to be turned to ask about a miscue. They correctly assume that once the page is turned, it is unlikely the reader will go back.

That’s what happened when the following reader miscued on the word sometimes in the sentence: “Sometimes he changes at lunchtime just to show off.”

STUDENT: “Some he ch- changes at lunchtime just to show off.” (Glances at the picture as she finishes, appearing to verify the print with the illustrations. Then, just as quickly, reaches for the edge of the page to turn)

TEACHER: (stops the page-turning to comment)

Okay, when I heard that part it didn’t quite make sense to me. “Some changes at lunchtime.” (reiterates the reader’s words)

STUDENT: Oh, sometimes! (says with a slight grin as she observes the text)

TEACHER: There, just like what I do. When I read something and it doesn’t make sense, you need to—

STUDENT: go back.

TEACHER: (makes a circular motion with her finger over the text) Yes, go back.

It was obvious to Kara that this reader was going to move on without self-correcting her miscue, so the teacher stepped forward to scaffold. However, she waited for the page-turning.

Not all teachers step in to correct. Natasha’s fluent reader was reading The Amazing Bone, by William Steig, when the reader miscued on the word instead. He read, “It was a brilliant day. Instead- . . . It was a brilliant day inst- ead of going
direct home from school . . .” but then the reader continued to read. He did not self-correct, and the scaffolder did not stop him.

When Natasha and I watched the video of this reading, I stopped it at this spot and asked, “Now, ‘It was a brilliant day and instead of going to school’ does not make sense, and you didn’t correct him. Why not?”

We know that Natasha understood fluency’s effect on the macro context and meaning when she responded, “I thought he would catch it himself. I expected him to catch it and so I thought I’d wait and see what happened.” Natasha gave her more fluent reader greater autonomy to self-correct his miscues. She knew that when readers have a chance to gather a larger unit of text—the entire sentence or paragraph—meanings solidify, readers realize their own errors, and they self-correct. This child’s lack of response to that miscue makes us wonder about his meaning making.

Readers sometimes do recognize their miscues, but feel no compulsion to reread and self-correct. Nevertheless, they have internalized that self-correction. Adults also choose this route sometimes. We just don’t take the time to go back every time we blunder—even though our brains have indeed self-corrected. We would not want novices to make a habit of this, though.

The Relationship Between Interruptions and Meaning

There are myriad ways to enter the act and help novices—some resemble a sledgehammer effect, while others are barely noticeable. In Knee to Knee, Eye to Eye (Cole 2003) I discuss the difference between interrupting and piggybacking, and I believe it is applicable here, as well. That is, when we gently slide in to help, we are piggybacking and it is not intrusive. However, when we obtrusively jump in and jolt the reader out of the context and his stream of thought, it is interrupting.

Notice the way that Julie enters to decode and simultaneously meld meaning. She and her fluent reader are reading The Reluctant Dragon when the child struggles with the word volume.

STUDENT: (reading) “But his little son, when he wasn’t helping his father, and often when

TEACHER: Volumes. That means like—um—many books, many books compiled into one, volumes? (Here the pitch of her voice rises slightly to connote a question, to which the student responsively nods, yes, meaning, “Yes, I understand it now.” And thus reads on.)

If this had not been caught via video, an observer would hardly have noticed it occurring, it was slipped so subtly into the the reading act. The more harmonically we can slide into the process to save fluency and to ground comprehension, the more secure the reader will be. Sometimes blatant interruptions are indeed necessary, but it is best to avoid them as much as possible. One way to accomplish this is to handle potential stumbling blocks before they occur. Another, whenever possible, is to use gestural instead of voiced interruptions.

The Noninterruptive Quality of Gestures

As I mentioned earlier, gestures are a unique and wonderful scaffold because they are not voiced; therefore, they are fairly noninterruptive. These silent pointing and body behaviors painted the background of every single teacher-reader scaffolding event. And quite often the gestural intention was to secure the text’s meanings.

To help make meaning more concrete, teachers pointed to pictures, to places in the room, to features on themselves or the child. Some teachers even incorporated hand movements to gesture a word’s meaning. That is, Lani pointed to her own chin and the child’s chin to denote chin, while Natasha signified another part of the body, leg. Coupled with graphophonics, most—but not all—of these gestures supported meaning.

Sometimes gestures actually got in the way of meaning when the word was still unknown after the gestured behavior. That’s because the reader focused more on decoding the gesture than decoding the word! (Chapter 8 discusses this to a greater extent.)

Gestures are usually more facilitative if we keep them implanted in the text itself and draw readers toward macro meanings. Therefore, it seemed that the most effective gestures contributing to the meaning were those that scaffolded a flow forward, a nudge toward chunking, or the pointing guidance that directed a reader to check the picture or to return and reread.
Catching Readers Before They Fall

Some teachers, like Hannah, seem to intuit potential stumbling blocks, so they respond prior to that seeming problem. For example, before beginning a new page with her novice, Hannah prepared the reader for an upcoming word: hopscotch. The teacher had predicted that this particular child might be intimidated by the word’s length. So knowing it was coming, Hannah used a pictorial cue prior to the time that the reader met the word.

At another time, Hannah let go of the page as her fluent reader approached the word persuading. Knowing full well that this was no first-grade word, her gesture, this time, indicated a concern even before her words were uttered and also before the reader’s miscue took form. Hannah’s gestural response indicated a potential miscue, and her prediction was correct. But she quietly slid in just before the word, reading along with the child until he moved past it. Such graceful scaffolding is not surprising for a teacher whose intuitions are grounded in thirty-two years of teaching over eight hundred children to read!

Interrupting for the Sake of the Whole

Sometimes fluency does not break down; nevertheless, we still see teachers interrupt the process. Such scaffolders say they are trying to rescue meaning before it is lost. They feel that a particular concept or term will ground the reader, and without it, the child may become more and more confused. That is, without that conceptual background, the macro meanings may be lost.

This is a common occurrence when reading aloud to preschoolers. Stories often need a bit of semantic glue to hold them together in a meaningful manner. Yet, we slide in and out with our scaffold as quickly as possible, so as to keep the meaning in flow. For example, while reading aloud the book Madeline by Ludwig Bemelmans, I scaffolded the concept of an appendix for four-year-old Delanie. Without it, the remainder of the story may have been confusing, for the term is central to the meanings vested in the latter part of the book—the operation, the scar, and the moral of the story itself.

Lani does this in the following when she interrupts her novice reader at the unknown word to briefly interface with an explanation. Her novice was reading Frogs and Toads (Butterworth 1990), a book about animals all over the world, when he miscued on the noun Australia. Therefore, the teacher not only told him the word, but also added some background knowledge. Lani first exclaimed, “Wow! You are really close!” Then she quickly added, “That’s the name of a country. It’s also a continent. It’s where this animal would live. You were very close to it—it’s Australia.”

With an entire section of text gathering its substance from that continent, the teacher felt compelled to develop the concept for the reader. She interrupted for the sake of the whole—but she kept it brief.

Interrupting to Define Strange Terms

Lani also rescued her fluent reader when the child was trying to apply a two-vowels-go-walking phonics rule to the noun ruins. In this case, of course, that rule wasn’t working. The scaffold began her explanation in this way, “Ruins. Sometimes words are hard to figure out because you don’t know the meaning of them...” and she went on to define ruins for her first grader.

Lani assumed that this reader had scant knowledge of what ruins are. He may have continued to decode this five-letter word as one syllable throughout the text had his teacher not stepped in to scaffold him with its correct pronunciation, as well as its meaning.

Another strange-term scaffolding took place when Kara’s student was reading The Principal’s New Clothes. After the child read “Mr. Bundy is the principal of P.S. 88,” Kara jumped in quickly for the following eight-second scaffold:

TEACHER: Ya know what, Let me tell you about P.S. P.S. here (pointing to P.S.) doesn’t mean the P.S. when we do letters. This is the short way to say public school. Some schools don’t have names like Glendale or Willowridge. Some schools are just called Public School and then a number. See there it is up there, Public School 88. (pointing to the picture)

These brief strange-term explanations occurred throughout all scaffolding. Who’s to say, however, whether readers may have eventually come to understand the term without the teacher’s support? Yet, when we are there beside
a novice for such a brief time, why not offer a hand and our heart when it feels appropriate?

Keep Interruptions Brief and Subtle!
We know that scaffolders do interrupt readers, and often with good reason. Marie Clay (1993), who focused much of her work on novices, would suggest that interruptions be as brief as possible. Certainly the slide-in scaffolding that keeps a beginner afloat would not be considered an interruption.

However, disrupting fluency always has the potential of disrupting meaning, so having a five-minute conversation midtext may inflict as much harm as the good that was intentioned. As a matter of fact, Clay suggests that we have kids take words apart only when necessary. That is, save most of the lengthier sound-it-out lessons for reading-group instruction. Or at least wait until the child has finished reading. Allington (1980) found that teachers interrupt struggling readers far too often, and this led him to suggest that we should avoid interrupting fluency.

Ultimately, interruption will depend upon the reader, the book, and the scaffolders. Careful consideration of this matter can only enhance the reading relationship.

Between-the-Pages Scaffolding
To circumvent during-reading interruptions, teachers frequently waited for the natural page-turning interruption. For instance, I stopped Brandon at page-turning and said, “Hang on a minute. We need to check something that you didn’t fix. You said, ‘Mother Bear has yarn to do.’ She does have yarn, but this word starts with w- instead of y-. Yarn would start with y-. Right? Mother Bear has w- work to do. What’s that word (pointing)?”

When I first begin guided reading groups, I always ask readers to read only two pages at a time. We then stop for a quick review and introduction to the next two pages. Baby steps.

Between the pages or at the end, teachers summarize or review what’s been read, constructing the macro context. For example, during a small guided reading group, as the readers neared the end of the story, I asked, “Now, what was Beth’s problem that needed to be solved?” And after the group answered, I asked, “Did it get solved yet?” During page-turning, I grasp the chance to ground the novices in story structure.

It's also a time when we can flavor upcoming text to make it more predictable. For instance, when Billy was near the end of The Giving Tree, I interjected, “Oh, here comes the sad part.” We continually add these tiny pieces of meaning to keep the flow as well as the reading relationship intact.

Thus, page-turning can be a convenient scaffolding moment, and as long as it is brief, it is less intrusive than interrupting in the middle of flow. Most of these scaffolds were tidbits of only a sentence or two, just enough to keep meaning afloat.

Scaffolding Meaning Through Proactive Mediation
Rescuing a reader even before he ever enters the reading act is most optimal. That's why all teachers grounded novices in text background proactively, that is, before the reader came in contact with the text. They did this before the child opened the book and at page-turning, providing meanings that aided prediction and, thus, fluency.

When teachers introduced a story before reading, they scaffolded meaning through a variety of methodology: providing background information, focusing on picture clues, modeling readerly behaviors through demonstrations, presenting (S-S) strategy briefings, and offering sensitive emotional support.

Novices Received More Prereading Prep
Teachers prepare their novice readers far more than their fluent readers. They said they do this to put the reader at ease, to build confidence, and to keep the emotional response positive.

Julie dedicatedly prepared her novice reader, and later, as she was watching the video, she volunteered the following: “I prepared him more . . . because I know he’s not an advanced reader and I sensed he was a bit nervous . . . [The fluent reader] is very confident . . . I knew that she really wouldn’t need it.” Notice how Julie sensed or intuited a nervousness in this child that an observer might not sense. She therefore tried to accommodate the reading relationship through gesture and by undergirding with more background. She allowed a lengthier warm-up period in which she developed story schema in order to accommodate certain “sensed” changes in the child.
In both time spent and depth of scaffolding, novices received more prereading scaffolding than fluent readers—scaffolding that would support the process of reading, the content of what was to be read, and the interest and confidence of these readers.

**Prereading Background Development: A Proactive Strategy**

Teachers used a variety of instructional avenues to support their readers prior to the reading act. They introduced story structure, made connections, discussed vocabulary, reviewed illustrations and photos, and offered related information to develop schema. They did this to make the text more predictable, because the more predictable it is, the easier it will be for the novice to read.

**Story Structure Aids Text Predictability**

Story structure is an important prereading consideration. If the text is a narrative, scaffolders introduce the characters (who may have strange names) and setting, and they entice readers with the story's unknowns that will need to be solved. If the text is expository, however, they explain that readers will be reading for information, and they make certain that the young novices have the prior knowledge upon which they can build. Lani did this before her novice read about frog and toads.

Sometimes teachers grounded readers in story structure prior to the story itself; while at other times this occurred in a flash, during page-turning. Either way, it occurred prior to the reading act, thus undergirding it with meaning and predictability.

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**Writing Reciprocity: Using Story Structure and Choice to Scaffold Writer’s Block**

It was writer’s workshop, but Rowanda sat staring out the window, while his pencil remained in its groove on his desk. I stooped down and whispered, “Rowanda, what would you like to write about?”

“I don’t know,” Rowanda distantly responded.

Rowanda had just finished writing a wonderful piece, but he was intimidated by all upcoming possibilities; that is, he just could not imagine that his next piece would be as good as the last. Thus, when asked about his new topic, he could only mutter, “I don’t know.”

When writers experience these I-don’t-know periods, I can help by offering choices related to story elements. That’s why I began with, “Do you want to write a true story or a make-believe story?”

“Make believe,” he said after a few seconds.

“Okay, fiction. So who do you want to have in your make-believe story? A giant? A king? The hulk? A witch? A dinosaur?” and I continued, offering just a few more. But, once I saw the writer soften, I stopped and let him choose the first character.

“A dinosaur,” Rowanda responded, devoid of enthusiasm.

“Okay, what other characters should be in this story with a dinosaur? A giant? An alien?” I scaffolded.

I continued to support Rowanda in this fashion through all the rest of the story elements, that is, setting, problem, events, resolution. Each time I offered a choice of several; each time I wrote his choice down on a sticky note in the corner of his desk. When we were finished he had the main elements of a good story. That is, Rowanda had the macro context.

I talked with him a bit more, asking questions related to what might happen next in this story, and for each of his answers I responded back with a related question, as though the idea was actually his. Before long, I invited, ‘Look at all your ideas for another great story! Let’s think of a good first sentence. Maybe, ‘Once upon a time,’ or ‘There was once,’ or ‘A long time ago.’ What do you think?’

As Rowanda responded, he also reached forward to pick up his pencil, and I knew this writer was again intentioned. So I left him to create the details for his story from the macro context we had constructed together. Sooner or later, just like others, Rowanda would realize that all stories have common elements that help guide our pen.
Content Connections Aid Text Predictability

Patty spent a period of time with her novice reader preparing him for a book from Ireland that she had selected. She connected her reader using everything from world geography to his own family lineage. She made a textual connection to similar books he’d read by recalling the characters “with unusual names.” Thus, when the reader began, he was well grounded in prior knowledge.

Before reading, Jane and Julie both connected readers to the author of the story through previous texts of that same writer. Teachers reviewed the author’s works, discussed favorites, and invited students to make their own author connections, all of which helped develop related schema, and it demonstrated how readers make connections between texts.

Hannah connected her novice reader to the story characters’ nicknames through uncovering the relationships among meaning, pictures, and print. She pointed to the picture of a little mouse and asked, “What do you think they call him? What kind of animal is he?”

“A mouse,” answered the reader.

“And what sound does he make?” the teacher went on.

“He squeaks,” the novice responded.

“Squeak! Squeak!” the teacher mimicked.

“So what’s a good name for him?”

“Squeaky,” the reader concluded correctly.

Later, when this reader encounters that word, it will hopefully be in his literacy pool.

Teaching Vocabulary Aids Predictability

Teachers focused heavily upon prereading vocabulary introduction. They had an uncanny ability to predict which words would serve as stumbling blocks to meaning, decoding, or both. I especially like Hannah’s intuitive responses in this regard. For example, before her novice began to read, Hannah suspected the child would have problems decoding *hopscotch* (Hannah told me this during video viewing). Therefore, she used a proactive strategy.

Hannah pointed to the picture of a child playing hopscotch and asked, “What’s that called?”

“I don’t know,” the reader answered, but then her eyes told us that she was pondering the question.

So Hannah went on, “We’ll see if you can figure that out by the time you read the rest of this page.”

“Hopscotch!” exclaimed the child. As the teacher suspected, she remembered after all.

When I was scaffolding a small group during guided reading, I continually mentioned the names of characters about to be introduced, because I know names are often difficult. I saw a name that I knew would give the readers a problem, so I said, “Look at this girl (pointing). Her name is Laura. Please find her name on the page before you read on. Then let’s see what Laura’s making.”

Picture Walks Aid Text Predictability

Pictures or illustrations are an important part of beginner texts, and novices need to understand how those pictures elevate the level of predictability. That is, pictures can help them predict meanings and decode unknown words through semantic matching. It is no surprise, then, that most teachers previewed pictures before the reader entered the reading act. Several teachers mentioned the relevance of the cover illustration to the story. Then, they skimmed through the text’s illustrations for a page-by-page picture walk. All of this grounded the beginner in story schema.

For example, Lani invited a picture walk prior to listening to her novice read about frogs and toads. As they discussed the photos, the teacher used questions, such as “What do you think this is about?” and “What is happening here?” to connect the reader to that which he would read. Therefore, the student had an overview of the story’s content before it was read. The novice would have a semantic head start, which would support both confidence and comprehension.

Julie invited her novice to investigate the picture prior to the story. She had a suspicion that he did not know about wishing wells, which is a key understanding to comprehend the story called *The Wishing Well*. Let’s investigate how she uses the picture proactively to solidify the concept.

**TEACHER:** Now, we are going to look at the picture. *(circles the picture with her finger)*

What are you thinking? *(but the novice does not respond)* The Wishing— *(pointing back up to the title for each word)* What’s that? *(points down at picture of well and quickly retracts her hand)* What do you call that
with water inside? You know what you call those things? *(quickly circles the well three times with her finger and then lifts her hand to use it for gesturing through the rest)* Like Jack and Jill up the hill—they got the water from this. *(waits a few seconds)* It’s called a well. *(circles the well again three times with her finger)* You don’t see too many of these nowadays—one that’s got the water in it. And the string rolls *(rolling gesture with hand)* down and water collects in the bucket and you roll it back up. They used to use a lot of these *(tap, tap, tap on the picture)* in the olden times. Not so much now.

The picture was an important resource for this prereading prep. Imagine explaining a well to a first grader without the picture! We can be grateful that all early reading texts have illustrations. Nevertheless, even with this prep, the novice stumbled on the word well during his reading.

**Demonstrating Readerly Behaviors Through Modeling: A Proactive Strategy**

Teachers could readily be seen modeling readerly behaviors for a student. Some of these were just a common part of their daily read-alouds, but other behaviors were implemented for a particular purpose. Teachers modeled looking at the picture; they modeled feelings related to characters, reading with inflection, rereading to capture a flow, as well as many other (S-S) behaviors. Thus, when their readers entered a text, they could follow their teacher’s lead.

Throughout Hannah’s scaffolding she repeatedly preread and reread words and sentences with noticeable inflection, modeling an almost dramatic performance that she hoped her readers would mirror. She never said, “Do it this way,” yet her expressive way became contagious after a while. Sometimes Hannah would slide right in with her reader, softly and in unison, yet emphasizing inflections, intonations, and rhythms. This seemed to draw the reader in, moving him toward fluency—a fast-moving and exciting scaffolding event—one that was even fun for an observer!

**Semantic-Syntactic Briefings: Proactive Micro-Macro Strategies**

Prior to the reading act, teachers nudged readers toward strategy use. Sometimes they explained and demonstrated the strategies for their students, while at other times, they expected readers, themselves, to explain the strategies they would use. Some of these strategies, such as cross-checking, were related to micro processing; whereas, others were related to the macro context and often involved chunking or comprehension strategies. Let’s investigate these.

**Proactive Micro Strategies**

Teachers readied their students for a more independent reading act by reviewing strategies that could be implemented when readers encountered an unknown word. Some had a list of these posted in the room. Most began by inviting the learner to review previously taught strategy options, and students responded with both (S-S) and (G) strategies. For example, teachers prompted:

- “When we come to a word we don’t know, what are some things we can do?” (Kara)
- “Before we read, what will you do when you come to a word you don’t know?” (Julie)
- “If you get stuck on some words, use some of the strategies you know.” (Jane)
- “What do you think (it) is going to be about/happen next?” (Patty)
- “Where else can you go for help (the picture)?” (Ardith)

Now one cannot help but notice that most of these questions require a metacognitive response; that is, the teacher did not tell a child what to do, but instead, using an open-ended question, just reminded readers that there were strategies that should be used. They left the ownership of choice in the hands of the student. This is important because it is indeed the student who will be using the strategies, yet in order to do that, he must have already been taught when and how to use them.

Nevertheless, students who answered, “Sound it out,” as the one-and-only strategy were nudged by their teachers to consider, “What else?” They did not want readers anchored to only one cueing system, for they knew that as long as novices stayed glued to the micro pieces of text, meaning would be at stake.

**Proactive Strategies That Transition Novices Toward Macro Processing**

Teachers consistently scaffolded readers toward a broader palate of cueing—scaffolds that would lead novices toward chunking and its more global enticements. Some teachers had charts with
strategy guidelines that were read prior to the reading act. Most often, they reminded students that “if you get stuck on a word, there is more you can do than just sound it out.” They mentioned the following:

- “Reread to help me understand it.”
- “Reread that sentence a little faster if it was choppy the first time.”
- “Skip the word you don’t know, go on, and then come back to the capital letter.”
- “Think about what you’ve read so far.”

So these scaffolders were helping novices decode unknown words, and at the same time they were nudging these young readers forward, out of that micro world and into the macro. For it is there that novices would come to understand and apply more global, comprehension strategies.

**Emotional Support That Undergirds Meaning: A Proactive Strategy**

As might be expected, teachers provided emotional support for their students before reading even began. One could not help but notice that as the actual reading act approached, all of the teachers tended to move their bodies closer to the child. This gestural support was probably most noticeable in Julie, who even later fretted aloud about how a child might feel regarding her corrections, reading before a camcorder, and such. It’s not surprising that Julie would demonstrate gestural nurturing to complement her words of support. And she demonstrated it right from the start.

As we viewed her scaffolding video after the session, I asked Julie to “notice your gestural behaviors. Your arm is around him and you’re leaning down. What do you think about that?”

She immediately responded, “I think I’m saying to him with my gestures, like ‘Don’t worry about this, because we’ll do it together; and if you have trouble, I will help you.’” This teacher knows that kids (and adults) can’t think when they’re nervous. A gentle touch might help make everything right.

Perhaps children just need to feel someone is there for them. As Hannah said, “I do that so the student knows [I’m] with her and so she knows she’s not alone.” I call it adding a touch of magic to the act.

**Pictures Help Prepare and Predict: Micro-Macro Perspectives**

Teachers showed novices how reading the pictures prior to the text will serve to support their decoding. They laid the groundwork for this in a number of ways.

**Verb Prep Through Pictures: The Micro Context**

Scaffolders drew attention to pictures to lay the groundwork for vocabulary. “Look. What’s she doing in the picture?” was a common scaffold that drew novices toward vocabulary related to events occurring. This helped ground a novice for the action vocabulary found in upcoming verbs.

**Noun Prep Through Pictures: The Micro Context**

Teachers sometimes added a meaning cue for an upcoming noun that might be an unknown, “Do you know what that’s called (pointing)?” Textual illustrations seemed to be very fertile ground for both conversations and meaning related to people, places, and things.

*Partners use the picture to support the text.*
Schema Prep Through Pictures: The Macro Context
Pictures are wonderful supports for both character and setting background. That’s why Jane focuses her reader on the picture prior to reading. She begins:

TEACHER: Let’s take a look at what he’s doing. (indicates where to look by pointing in circular motions around the page with her forefinger) He’s in bed. Do you think he’s getting up or going to sleep?
STUDENT: Getting up.
TEACHER: Okay, I think he’s getting up, too. How does he look? Does he look surprised? Does he look angry? Does he look happy?
STUDENT: He looks surprised.

So before the reader even begins to read, he already understands a good bit about the setting for the story, and he has a sense of the character. Drawing readers’ attention to pictures is an important habit to instill.

The schema prep that pictures provide is not only for novices. It is just as important for students reading content-area books, such as history, science, and technology. Publishers go to a great deal of trouble and expense to extend and supplement the text in this manner, and they expect readers to use those resources. Therefore, it’s a habit worth instilling early!

Prediction Prep Through Pictures: The Macro Context
Teachers also laid the groundwork for upcoming elements in story schema. Mostly, they used illustrations to help them reach forward, to predict what was about to occur. “Uh-oh! What’s gonna happen to him next?” was a very common question. They were teaching novices that reading is a process in which we continually predict, then read on into the macro context to confirm or nullify those predictions.

Pictures Help Bring Meaning to Confusion
In the following, notice how Jane also references her novice reader to the pictures. Especially consider her invitations to think and the locus of control. This episode begins when the reader is finishing a sentence in a Little Critter text (Mayer 1986). The reader is unsure of the word tired, because she has confused pictured characters. However, the illustrations are about to help her:

STUDENT: (reading) “until she was . . . um . . . um . . . tired?” (with tentative inflection)
TEACHER: That’s right. Until she was tired. (validating, but sensing confusion through the reader’s hesitation and voice inflection, points at a smiling, excited Critter and asks) Does that make sense?
STUDENT: No. (shaking her head)
TEACHER: You know why? ’Cause, does she look tired? (pointing to a jubilant Little Critter)
STUDENT: (shakes her head no)

TEACHER: No, but you know what? That’s what it says. (referencing picture and then reviewing) If I let her go on the swing until she was tired— (rephrasing author’s words) Who’s tired? (Now she cues to the other character in the story who is tired, so the child accepts this invitation and points to that creature, and thus answers the question and, ideally, her own character confusion.)
TEACHER: Why is she so tired?
STUDENT: ’Cuz, she’s tired of pushing her.

(Bingo! Through the teacher’s strategic questions and references to pictures, the text now makes sense to this reader.)

TEACHER: That’s right! She’s tired of doing all those things on the playground with her. Right? She’s the one that’s tired! (validating)

Jane used the picture to clear up a confusion in the mind of the novice. But she did it cleverly, through a problem-solving technique—no doubt one that she hoped the novice would use independently someday.

Pictures Help Cue Unknown Words
Hannah orchestrates between picture and print in a wonderful flowing manner to help the reader construct the local meanings and inferences needed to remember a noun. Her novice, who is reading Things to Like by Richard Scarry (1987), stumbles on a story character’s name, Fingers.

Hannah immediately references the picture, where we find an octopus and duck, but it is the duck who has lots of fingers protruding. Hannah points to this strange duck-like creature and asks, “Why do they call him Fingers?”

“He has lots of fingers,” responds the novice.
“Yes, look at all the fingers he has,” reinforces the teacher.
“Just like an octopus!” connects the reader.
“That’s right! So they thought a good nickname for him would be—?”

“Fingers!” The novice responds and continues reading the sentence.

Hannah and her novice helped lay several meanings in place through picture connections in this little vignette. Many illustrators are quite purposeful about the way they lead youngsters into meaning with their artistic creations. That’s why pictures are an important cue.

In this previous episode the teacher kept responses anchored to the picture for her inexperienced novice. She offered explicit cues that would lead the novice reader forward with plenty of help. But now notice the difference in scaffolding in the following episode where the novice is a bit more experienced. Here, invitations are more open, the cues are more diverse, and the picture is saved as the final key to unlocking the unknown word.

We join this dyad at a point where the reader has miscued on \textit{began}. (The text reads: “Billy went back in his room and began to dress.”)

\textbf{TEACHER:} Do you want to go back? (offers an \textit{[S-S]} invitation, but then rereads for the student) “Billy went back in his room and—”

\textbf{STUDENT:} (does not apply \textit{[G]} cue offered by the teacher, but instead uses his own favorite keep-going strategy, Say Blank) “—blank to dress.”

\textbf{TEACHER:} (interrupts) Why don’t you check out the pictures and see what he is doing? (no pointing, just an open cue to use the pictures)

It’s apparent that this teacher offers her reader more autonomy and cue variety. She is less specific in her leading, and less wordy in her explanations. This is true of most all of the fluent-reader mediators. As a matter of fact, when we compare the amount of spoken mediation for the novices with that of the fluents we can easily see that, in general, teachers take more seconds-per-word when mediating the novice reader (see Figure 5–1). Does this align with the way in which we teach other skills in our daily lives? Do we allow more skilled baseball players, swimmers, and writers more autonomy with less specific guidance?
Fluency and Meaning: A Symbiotic Relationship

We know that chunking leads to fluency, which then develops the macro perspective that leads to comprehension. That is why chunking and fluency cues are woven in and out and throughout the scaffolding of novices. And dysfluent reader behaviors made it fairly obvious when assistance was needed. Thus, dysfluency became the teacher’s cue to step in and scaffold. That focus on fluency ran like an undercurrent through the entire reading relationship.

Teachers laid the pathways to fluency in a number of ways. The last chapter of this book investigates all of these pathways, but at this point we are mainly concerned with the way in which their scaffolding of fluency helped students make semantic matches and aided them in understanding larger units of text.

How Teachers Modeled Fluency for Macro Meanings

Novices need fluent models. When they listen all day to primarily beginning, word-by-word readers, they have few demonstrations to emulate. It’s therefore important to provide lots of fluent modeling.

Sometimes we hear teachers say, “Read it faster.” But fast does not necessarily connote fluent, even though many think the two are synonymous. They reach for the term faster because they understand that very slow, word-by-word reading seems to distort meaning. We have already discussed why this is usually so. Yet, merely telling a child to read it faster does not help. However, there are some ways to scaffold these slow readers.

One of the important scaffolds teachers offered was modeling. Teachers themselves supported the macro context for the novices, giving them something they could not, at that point, capture for themselves. Teachers merely modeled a sentence or two in a fluent and meaningful manner. They did this by reading before, after, and with kids.

How Teachers Reread in Meaningful Chunks

Closely related to modeling is rereading. Hannah is a wonderful example of a teacher who demonstrates rereading for fluency. She uses some tactics that have become a natural part of her transactions.

On every single page Hannah focused on fluency with zealous and yet harmonic voice and gestures. She approached chunking in two ways, (1) by reading with her reader, but leading toward more fluent behaviors and (2) reading after her reader to again demonstrate and celebrate what chunking sounds like. The novice haltingly read, “Kitty . . . loves . . . Pickles,” and Hannah immediately chunked the three words into one syntactic unit, celebrating, “Kitty loves Pickles! Good job!”

At other times Hannah approached fluency in a little different manner. That is, when her novice reader read haltingly, Hannah did not reread to model, but invited the child himself to reread for fluency. Notice the combination of fluency scaffolds that Hannah uses in the following, when her novice carefully decoded the word Babykins.

Hannah first responded, “Good! Babykins!”

The student went on to read “—has fun building a tall tower.”

But before they turned the page, the teacher praised and reread, “Pretty good! Has fun building a tower.” Then, Hannah invited the student to reread, “Can you read that again? Baby—”

The student slid right in and reread, “Babykins has fun building a tall tower.”

Once again, Hannah celebrated her reader; this time with, “Wow!”

Hannah knows that word-by-word reading bogs down the short-term memory and keeps the reader in the micro context. So sometimes Hannah models, rereading, while at other times she invites the novice to do it. Either will nudge this child toward larger syntactic chunks and their macro meanings.

How Teachers Use Macro Processing for Micro Meanings

Teachers also used keep-going strategies in their thrust toward macro meanings—ones that might cue a previous semantic mismatch. Jane’s novice reader got stuck mid-sentence reading a Little Critter book. Watch how Jane implements the skip-it strategy.

STUDENT: (reading) “My little sister w-went . . . wanted . . . w-w—” (struggling with wanted)
TEACHER: Okay, why don’t you skip it and go on, and then we can come back to it. “My little—” (begins pointing to words)
STUDENT: “sister wanted to go to the park”
(Teacher takes finger away.) “Mom was too blank so I said ‘I’ll take her.’” (Teacher is pointing to each word again as the child reads.)
TEACHER: What do you think? (rereads for the child) “Mom was too what?” (points to the word she’s referencing)
STUDENT: Busy.
TEACHER: Excellent!

Notice how the macro meanings affected the micro context for this child. This time the teacher had to lead the novice through the strategy, but with this kind of success, perhaps the next time this reader will use it on her own.

One important part of this skip-it strategy, however, is the return to reread. In this example, the teacher did the return for the child. Without that last step of returning to reread, some students develop a habit of just skipping unknown words and then forgetting about them, which takes an enormous toll on meaning. The return after skipping shows students that rereading provides the fluency flow and semantic grist needed to identify unknowns on that second time through. That is, an (S-S) strategy guides the reader toward meaning and fluency, which then interacts with the available graphophonics cues. The more cues, the more clues!

How Teachers Use Semantic-Syntactic Drama Cues for Meaning

Some teachers felt that using a particular voice inflection would help students remember a word or phrase, and Marie Clay (1993) also suggests using exaggerated voice to focus a reader’s attention. One teacher commented, “I think the more dramatic you make it, the more they remember it.”

Hannah mentioned after viewing that she blended through words with her reader because “then the [unknown] word wouldn’t sound so silly,” meaning that, to young readers, a haltingly read word or phrase may still be incomprehensible or, as she said, “sound silly.” This may give a novice reason to pause, but Hannah slides in and accompanies her readers forward, letting them know that all is well. In other words, the teacher’s added fluency helps give the sentence and the whole relationship more meaning.

Mini-Lessons Inside the Act

Occasionally, teachers take readers back for a context-related mini-lesson. In the following the student had miscued on the word does, substituting the somewhat synonymous verb did, and the teacher used the miscue as the substance for an instantaneous mini-lesson grounded in both graphophonics and meaning. Watch how she keeps meaning in the forefront.

The teacher returns to that section of text, pointing and repeating what the child had read earlier.

TEACHER: (repeating after child) “But mommy did not.” The word did would make sense to you? But can I ask you a question, though? It makes perfect sense here, and if I said that, I would keep going, too. And making sense is always the number one job, but if I were to ask you again to look at that word closely, could that be di- d? (stressing that final sound) No, it couldn’t be did (pointing under the S in does). I’ll tell you what the word is because it is one of those tricky words that is not even spelled the way it sounds. It’s so tricky. (reads while pointing to each word) “But mommy does not.”

Teaching inside the process like this can be very effective. Nevertheless, a reader will lose sight of macro and micro meanings when during-reading interruptions are frequent or lengthy. On the other hand, saving them for long afterward will remove the lesson from its meaningful context. Bottom line: keep inside mini-lessons brief and infrequent.

How Teachers Scaffold Comprehension Strategies: Macro Processes

Much of the preceding part of this chapter was closely related to semantic-syntactic strategies used within a micro context and triggered by local unknowns. Even so, we saw how teachers
helped readers reach forward to grasp the bigger picture. It is within these macro meanings that readers learn to use comprehension strategies that will help them construct global meanings.

Interestingly, in her seven thousand minutes of classroom observations, Dolores Durkin (1978–79) found that comprehension was actually taught less than 1 percent of the time. It seems teachers confuse the product with the process. That is, many teachers think that a worksheet of comprehension questions to be answered by students is teaching comprehension, when it is actually assessing the product.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to teach comprehension strategies within the process without imposing blatant interruptions, because these more complex processes are almost impossible to gesture. Trying to do so would no doubt only draw the reader away from the context, rather than bringing him closer to it. Therefore, teachers primarily scaffold comprehension strategies before the reading act, during page-turning, or after the reading has been completed.

Teaching Comprehension Strategies Between the Pages

Jane slips meaningful comprehension strategies in between page-turns with her novice reader, who is reading Just Me and My Little Sister by Mercer Mayer. Watch what happens as Jane demonstrates story synthesis and then how her reader makes connections to the text. Both great comprehension strategies!

Story Synthesis and Story Connections with a Novice

Story Synthesis:

**TEACHER:** (at page-turning, slips in to synthesize)
He’s having a hard time keeping up. It looks like he’s falling. *(points to the picture of child falling and then looks back to child in an invitational manner)* He’s being dragged, right? He can’t even keep up with it. *(turns the page and the student interjects to make connections)*

**STUDENT:** I did that before!

**TEACHER:** (now turns page back since child is making a connection. A very sensitive dance here—a caring dance) Did you? That happened to me, too! *(another honest connection)*

Making Connections:

**STUDENT:** My cousin ran so fast he—I had to hold on so I couldn’t fall off. I hanged on and I was swinging around. *(laughing)*

At this point the teacher laughs, too, as she turns the page again and quickly leads the novice back into the act; she does not want to sever the contextual ties to the novice’s text memory store. It is interesting how effectively the book itself becomes a mediator for such flowing continuations.

Three Kinds of Connections That Support Comprehension

It’s always wise to have a sense of where you are going before you get there. No doubt that is why teachers made connections that would tie readers to the context of text, while at the same time, they developed an interest in the story or the book being read by connecting many of the text’s ideas through mini-discussions. Teachers themselves seemed to be living the text experience. That is, they were not separate from the student-book event, but actually an integral part of a triadic transaction.

Lani demonstrates these connections throughout her transactions that often take place between the pages of her novice’s expository text. Most teachers did use this five-second page-turning intermission to ground comprehension. Observing these brief and connected transactions, I find it difficult to dub them an interruption. They instead appear to be part of the textual fabric.

We just saw how Jane and her reader connected to the events in a story. But there are actually several ways in which we can encourage readers to connect stories to their own prior experiences and knowledge, all important comprehension strategies. Let’s look at each of these.

How Teachers Scaffold Connections to Life’s Experiences

One of the fundamental ways in which we comprehend is by connecting the new to the old, the unknown to the known. Teachers often connect their own lives and the lives of their students to what is being read—a key comprehension strategy (Keene and Zimmerman 1997).

Sometimes, teachers offered questions that helped the child make connections to his own life, such as “What would you do if . . . ?” Jane asked her fluent reader, “What do you do in the
morning?” and “What would you do if you found one?” She was connecting the reader’s life to the life of the story characters and events.

Kara asked her novice reader, who was reading (Packard 1993) My Messy Room, “Is this what your room looks like? I’m going to call your mom and ask,” she teased.

Julie asked her fluent reader, “Would you like to be a shepherd? Would you like this job?” So regardless of the level of the reader, teachers tended to tie the book to the child’s personal life, as well as their own.

When my reading group was reading about a child who made a shape book, I asked, “What shape would your book be about?”

Hannah led her novice toward such connections when a character was playing music. After discussing the character’s actions, Hannah asked the reader, “Do you like music?”

The reader made an immediate connection, “Uh-huh! My dad turns up the radio really loud and then I like to dance!”

All teachers encouraged kids to connect what they were reading to their own lives. At times this meant connecting facts to facts; yet at other times, it meant connecting real-life facts to textual fiction. Regardless, making personal connections grounded new text in old meanings and helped strengthen the reading relationship.

How Teachers Scaffold Connections to Other Texts
All texts are like others in some ways. Some are very much alike; whereas, others differ greatly. Nevertheless, we can support young readers by connecting known similarities. Books about the same topic, from the same genre, a part of the same series, can actually offer textual scaffolding. We want to help readers make these text connections a common link in their reading act, because they add meaning, broaden schema, and evoke greater interest.

That’s why Lani draws her novice reader’s attention to the fact that his book is part of a series that he has already tasted. She says, “Frogs and Toads, hmmm. Is this part of that same series you’ve been reading? Why did you choose this one?” Lani invites the reader to reflect on any connections that he may have already made when selecting this text from a known series. Then, she can build on his responses, and he himself can build on those connections as well.

Once I had steeped readers in my room in the patterns of predictable texts, they found other patterned books everywhere. Then, they compared the new text patterns with those of other texts. They could readily do this by the second month of school, but only because they’d been steeped in noticing patterned texts. It’s the steeping that’s fundamental.

How Teachers Scaffold Connections to Authors
Authors are a part of the reading relationship, too. And most novices have a favorite! They get hooked on Steven Kellogg or Robert Munsch or Dr. Seuss or hundreds of others. Some like humor, others prefer nonfiction, while many enjoy fairy tales. Certainly, the menu is bountiful. Yet, once we know a student’s preferences, offering more books by that known author is a good way to create immediate interest and ground connections. After reading a text by a particular author, we have a feel for that author’s style, vocabulary, sentence structure, content, and such. It therefore makes another book by that same author somewhat easier to read, to understand, and to connect to. This means texts by the same author will help scaffold novice readers. Consider Dr. Seuss. What three-year-old couldn’t find more of his books once he experiences a few?

I readily use author connections during scaffolding—and Robert Munsch is usually a good bet! For example, one time an observer caught the following transaction on video during Read-a-Book, when I stooped down beside the desk of a young novice and offered him another book by a known author.

I reminded, “Remember, Robert Munsch? Want to read another one?” Feeling a bit intimidated, the reader hesitated to answer, but just shrugged, instead.

So I suggested, “Let me start you out by reading the first few pages, okay? See if it’s like his other books.” I was leading toward potential connections that would build confidence.

And indeed it did just that. For after I quickly read the first few pages, the novice caught my eye with his smile. “What do you think,” I asked. “Is it like his other books?”

“Yeah,” responded the first grader.

I knew the relationship was growing, so I prodded, “How?”
“’Cause it’s funny. And it keeps repeating,” he offered, gaining confidence.

“Absolutely!” I agreed. “You even noticed the pattern that makes Munsch books easy to read. Why don’t you reread the part I just read and then keep going? If you have trouble, just raise your hand.” I left the young reader as he re-opened his new Munsch book, preparing to add more connections to his Robert Munsch reading relationship.

Text connections are more thoroughly discussed in Knee to Knee, Eye to Eye (Cole 2003), in Strategies That Work (Harvey and Goudvis 2000), and in Mosaic of Thought (Keene and Zimmerman 1997).

How Teachers Scaffold Questioning as a Comprehension Strategy

Teachers readily draw students’ attention to the sense of what’s being read. Julie frequently asks her readers: “Does that make sense?” or “Do you know what that means?” Sometimes she does this to prompt the reader’s thinking, while at other times she uses this cue for her own assessment, to see if meaning is actually intact. But these questions focus more toward leading a student into chunking and out of the micro level.

Other questions emanated from and gathered their responses in the macro context. General in-process questions that could act as common strategies across texts are:

- What are you wondering now?
- Why did that happen?
- How do you think s/he’ll do that?
- Where do you think they’ll go next?
- Who do you think will win?
- Why can’t s/he do that?
- How do you think they’ll get there?

Notice how many of these begin with “Why do you think . . .?” and “How do you think . . .?” These draw readers to elaborate, yet they should not elaborate on pie in the sky. In other words, elaborations should grow out of evidence and then be substantiated or nullified by new evidence.

Lani, who earlier shared her comprehension strategies with us, seems to salt and pepper her mediation with questions, most of which were laden with rich science concepts that might seduce a wondering (or a wandering) mind. Lani led her novice through his Frogs and Toads (Butterworth 1990) expository text with a variety of fascinating wonders! Surely all these authentic questions paved the path toward the development of that novice’s own wondering strategies.

As I myself read to and with kids, I often interject throughout the text, “What are you wondering about?” In so doing, I demonstrate for kids that wonders nudge us to discover their answers as we read on. They keep connecting us to the text and laying the groundwork for comprehension.

Lani uses another tactic. She utters a subtle, “Hm-m-m,” as she and the reader traverse text. She is demonstrating the way in which readers ponder as they read. They ask themselves questions, which become the keys to comprehension (Pressley 2000; Keene and Zimmerman 1997).

We join Lani and the reader as the novice is finishing a page of expository text. Earlier, the youngster had predicted (inferred) that the frogs’ air sac would be filled with eggs, but now the text has not validated that prediction. Let’s see what happens.

**TEACHER:** Air, hm-m-m. (pondering) But what did you say before that you thought they filled it with? (pointing)

**STUDENT:** Eggs.

**TEACHER:** Hm-m-m. Could they do both? (with pen pressed against corner of mouth in pensive consideration)

**STUDENT:** I don’t know.

**TEACHER:** I don’t know either. (shaking her head and shrugging her shoulders—an honest answer) Let’s read on and find out. (scaffolds toward reading for evidence)

Here you can see how Lani has intertextual wonder-chats with her novice reader, weaving these ten-second conversations in and out in a natural way. These little book chats of Lani’s have a think-aloud structure; they demonstrate overtly the way in which people wonder their way covertly through books. In so doing, Lani uses several meaning cues to help lay the groundwork for what is to come. However, she does not do it through standard comprehension questions—that is, she does not use a teacher’s manual. She speaks with each child as a unique equal, one who is on a similar journey that has occasional brief way stations for shared wondering.
The fact that Lani’s students chose to read expository texts is important here, because an information text can more easily be interrupted without harming meanings. As a matter of fact, some say that is how we should use expository text—for specific bits or pieces of information we might need, as opposed to reading them cover to cover. At any rate, Lani would never have interrupted a narrative with so many questions.

How Teachers Scaffold Inference Strategies for Comprehension

We teach readers to construct inferences from the title on. That is, even when readers are discussing a title, they are being drawn into the world of inferential thinking. After reading the title and checking the cover illustration, we ask them, “What do you think this story is going to be about?” Their answer will be an inference, constructed from the context of the cover and title.

Teachers continually ask, “What do you think is going to happen next?” Readers must then construct from what has already been read to infer what might occur next. Yet, they must build on solid evidence. We expect their maybes to be educated guesses.

Inferences carry an air of tentativeness, and often possess tentative verbs, such as might. Thus, we hear teachers ask, “What might happen next?” or “How could they get there?” These are often followed by responses that begin with maybe or probably, two words that researchers tell us are not often uttered in our classrooms.

Patty demonstrates how readers draw tentative conclusions and infer from pictures. After turning the page to a new picture, she says, “Okay, there they are having their little cake (explaining the picture). And they went to the cake shop and next the pet shop. Maybe they had to go in there to get some pet food (inference).” Once they read on, they will prove or disprove Patty’s inference.

Patty demonstrated for her reader how mature readers think as they process text. She did it through a think-aloud containing a tentative hypothesis. It is through such modeling that readers learn comprehension strategies such as inference. Novices need many such demonstrations.

How Teachers Scaffold Text Synthesis for Comprehension

One of the common practices that many teachers have is to ask a reader to “Tell me about what you’ve read so far.” This is one of the simplest ways in which to lay the groundwork for synthesis or summary, both of which are key comprehension strategies.

Synthesis, however, more carefully considers the pieces and their relationship to the whole. Often, asking a Why? question moves readers toward synthesis. That is what happened when novice reader Anthony proudly finished reading The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein.

The story ends with both the tree, now a stump, and the boy having grown old and tired. The tree, having loved the boy throughout the years, invites the boy to sit on her. And the book concludes with “And the boy did. And the tree was happy.”

I asked Anthony, a tiny boy who had blossomed late in the year, “Do you think the boy is happy, too?” I used a “Do you think . . . ?”, question which requires him to synthesize what he knows about the character and then decide what he thinks.

Anthony responded “Uh-huh,” even though the old man does not look happy.

I agreed, but inquired further, “But why do you think the boy is happy?”

“’Cause he has the tree to sit on and be with,” Anthony said.

“Well, why do you think the tree was happy, too?” I asked.

Anthony smiled one of those sensitively knowing smiles and responded, “Because he finally has the boy to be with him.”

“Yes, he sure waited a long time, didn’t he?” I added.

Anthony had to synthesize the story to some extent to construct his answers. Indeed, I fear there are some adults who might not truly understand this beautiful story. Anthony did.

Synthesis also must occur when we ask readers to compare a story they are reading to another they’ve read. Readers must consider the pieces, their relationship to the whole, and then their relationship to the pieces from the other whole. After Bobby read a somewhat basalized form of Little Red Riding Hood, I asked, “So Bobby, is this Little Red Riding Hood like others you’ve read?”
Bobby began thinking aloud to share the ways in which the two stories were alike, beginning with, “She takes food to her Grandma in both of them,” and he continued to synthesize characters and events for their similarities and their differences.

Whereas we usually think of summary as a mere regurgitation of the storyline, synthesis is a step beyond. A higher level of thinking is required. Nevertheless, even first graders can do it.

Indeed, there are many comprehension strategies that help readers with macro processing, so it’s beneficial for teachers to incorporate these into their scaffolding. However, readers need to eventually move into a metacognitive stance—one that finds them monitoring their own comprehension, implementing strategies, and clearing up confusions independently. Monitoring is perhaps one of the most difficult acts for young readers to develop—especially when they are bored.

**Monitoring Comprehension, for, with, and by the Reader**

The path to optimal comprehension is continual monitoring, first for the student, then with the student, and finally by the student. Teachers can demonstrate these behaviors for readers, but eventually students, themselves, must grow into metacognitive behaviors involved in monitoring.

Teachers often scaffold monitoring by sensitively questioning at strategic points in the text. They begin by owning the act in order to help readers understand how and why they must follow their teacher’s lead.

Watch how Julie harmoniously moves her fluent reader toward a connection, an inference, and monitoring, as the child reads a section of *The Reluctant Dragon*. After the taping, Julie and I watched the video. It was then that she related the reason for her interruption. She said that the reader was reading so fast that she felt the child may not have comprehended, and that is why she interrupts.

**STUDENT:** (reading and rocking in time with the rapid music of her own words) “…as much as he liked; and instead of frequently getting a cuff on the side of the head, as might very well have happened to him, he was treated more or less as an equal by his parents.”

**TEACHER:** Do you know what they mean by that? (pointing to the phrase “treated as an equal” and sliding her finger under it twice within the blink of an eye) “Treated as an equal?” Treated as an equal by his parents? (interfacing with a question to clarify)

**STUDENT:** (leans back, pulls her head into her shirt and slowly lifts her shoulders, which would probably indicate to the teacher that this reader doesn’t know, yet doesn’t really want to say so, or is not sure that she doesn’t know)

**TEACHER:** He was so proud that his parents were proud of him because of what he could do. (As teacher explains, the student becomes noticeably nervous, unsure—probably due to the interruption. But notice now that the teacher makes a personal connection to the life of the reader and thus mends the relationship) Probably like your parents are proud of you because of what you can do. You like to read a lot, right? (leans forward to look into the face of the child, to salve all wounds, and as she asks this question, the child looks up with a responsive, pleased facial expression and nods her head)

**STUDENT:** Uh-huh.

**TEACHER:** And your mom’s proud of you about that. Yeah?

**STUDENT:** (nods to affirm again, smiling)

As we discussed this section of the video, Julie noticed how she stopped the reader by touching the text. She said she did it “just to go back and check to see if she understands.”

“What do you have up your sleeve by re-reading that little section there? So—uh—why did you do that?” I asked.

“I still want to keep checking to see if she’s able to relate it to her own life experience,” she explained. “Does she know what it means to be equal with someone? Does she know what it means to be equal with her parents?”

This prompted my mini-synthesis of the situation, “Okay, so this is like a form of assessment almost. It’s instruction and assessment melded together, because you’re actually seeing if she’s understanding it. *(Julie is nodding in affirmation)* Am I correct that this is your way to monitor that?”

“Uh-huh, just to see if she’s reading for meaning,” she reiterates. “Does it have any significance to her? Does she relate to that?”
I always ask: Do you know what that means? And when I need to, I come up at the end with an example."

I noticed that during the videos of my own scaffolding, I, like Julie, continually asked readers comprehension monitoring questions, such as “Do you know what that means?” and “Does that make sense?” and “Do you understand?”

This is such a great illustration of how everything is woven together into a vibrant, living relationship. This is not just monitoring. It is not just connecting. It is more than comprehending. It is a relationship of all of the above and more. And this is why basals and scripts just will not make the grade! How could they monitor in this fashion? How could they make such intimate connections? How could they salve wounds? How could they scaffold individually? Let’s face it, they can’t! Only teachers can do that.

A Fine Balance

From the very beginning, we interface each child’s life with meanings. The pieces that lose their meaning seem to fall by the wayside, gone and forgotten. It’s through meaning that children learn to navigate this world, to communicate, to read. As the teachers in this chapter have demonstrated, the ways to help kids construct meaning are limitless.

Yet, for a preword reader who does not even notice words yet, we cannot focus only on meaning, because to do so would be to ignore the page’s graphics, which is actually what’s being read in the first place. It is a fine scaffolding balance between the meaning, the syntax, and the graphophonics that is necessary for optimal novice progress. We can help readers make meaning as they read, but we also need to help them notice and then decode words. Novices need scaffolding in all of this. That is why the next chapter focuses on graphophonics.

Grist for Discussion

Text Used for Upcoming Transcription

My little sister wanted to go to the park.

Mom was too busy so I said I’d take her.

So we went to the park, just me and my sister.

My little sister wanted to play basketball but the hoop was too high.

Read the transcription below. Mark all (S-S) cues, then examine each one to decide if the cue helped the reader. Was macro processing used? Afterward, discuss how you might have scaffolded this reader in a different manner.

Jane and her novice reader are beginning Just Me and My Little Sister, a Mercer Mayer book. Jane has just incorporated some proactive mediating to scaffold meanings prior to reading. Pleased with her reader’s connections, she responds:

TEACHER: Great! Okay. (opens to first page of book and continues to hold text) Let’s see what Little Critter is going to do with his little sister. There’s Critter (pointing to pictures) and I guess her name is Too. I didn’t even know that! That’s a funny name! Okay—

STUDENT: “My little sister w- went- wanted w- w” (struggling with wanted)

TEACHER: Okay. Why don’t you skip it and go on and then we can come back to it? (slides her finger past the word in question)

STUDENT: (reads) “blank to go to blank. Mom was too—”

TEACHER: What do you think? Mom was too what?

STUDENT: Busy.

TEACHER: Excellent! As you can see, Mom is working there, right? (points quickly to the mom and then starts to turn the page) You did a nice job figuring out that word. So Critter is going to take sister because mom is so busy.

STUDENT: (continues reading) “So we went to the park just me and my little sister.”

TEACHER: What does the sign say? (points to signs in picture one at a time)
STUDENT: “To the park. This way. Keep going.”
(afterward, returns to the text) “My little sister want- wanted to play basketball, but the . . . blank was too . . . blank.”
TEACHER: Okay. But the what? (pointing in circular motions around the picture) Let’s see what that would be. “But the—” Hm-m-m. What do you need when you play basket-ball? It has a ball (pointing) and what is this? (pointing at the hoop) Do you know what this is called?
STUDENT: The hoop?
TEACHER: The hoop, right! (rereads for child and fills in unknown word) “But the hoop was too—” what?
STUDENT: Hard?
TEACHER: Alright, she’s getting on top of her brother, there. (pointing) So the hoop is too— He’s going to make her taller so she can get to it. So, the hoop is too— what?
STUDENT: High!
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