

Powerful Teaching Interactions in Writing: Lessons from Reading Recovery Teachers

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*It was my party! The piñata had candy
and lollipops, too.*

—written by Sophie,

Reading Recovery student

The smile of self-satisfaction that spreads across the face of a young child who knows the message written is exactly the message that was intended makes a parent's heart leap and a teacher's spirit soar. Learning how to write a story is a complex process. The young child must learn how to go from thoughts to oral language to transcription, and must learn how to solve each word in that transcription—one by one—and record it. When a writing task is accomplished it is rewarding for both the child and the teacher. Because teaching writing is complex, Reading Recovery teachers find value in examining their instruction to refine their understandings and to improve their craft.

The purpose of this article is to share observations of Reading Recovery teachers engaged in scaffolding their students' word writing strategies during the writing component of Reading Recovery lessons. These observations were collected in a related project (Matczuk, 2004) designed to examine Reading Recovery lessons and teachers in light of Wood's (2003) theory of contingent teaching. While engaged in that

process, we discovered that this approach helped identify aspects of the tutor-student relationship useful in describing specific teaching moves and in depicting how teaching changes over time. To share that understanding and the observations of effective teachers, the following discussion presents a brief review of the challenges of teaching writing in Reading Recovery lessons, a discussion of Wood's theory of contingent teaching and its relationship to teaching writing strategies, and examples of teacher-child interactions that reveal dimensions of skillful tutoring.

The specific examples presented in this article were collected by observing 10 trained Reading Recovery teachers working in urban and rural schools in Manitoba, Canada. Each was observed teaching the same student on six different occasions extending over the course of the student's series of Reading Recovery lessons. The writing portion of lessons analyzed included all interactions occurring after the child had generated the story. This allowed for capturing the teacher-child interactions as students learned how to record the words in their stories. By observing these teachers, specific ways in which their decisions and exchanges supported their students were identified.

Challenges in the Teaching of Writing in the Reading Recovery Lesson

During the writing time of the Reading Recovery lesson, the teacher supports the child as he records a story. The recording of the story is a co-construction process. While the teacher's contribution to production is substantial in the early days of a child's series of lessons

“she is creating the opportunities for the child to do what he can, write what he knows, and learn something new. As the child gains increased control over the writing process, the teacher's role in the tutorial relationship changes—to reminding, prompting and facilitating the production by the child. [By the end] of the child's [series of lessons], the teacher's role shifts to monitoring the child's performance, anticipating and problem solving difficulties, and teaching more by talking than by demonstration.” (Clay, 1993, p. 29)

How do Reading Recovery teachers foster changes and growth in the learner's understanding? In what ways do they scaffold the learner? How does the scaffolding change over time? The ever-changing role of the

teacher is a demanding one, and to make moment-by-moment decisions. Reading Recovery teachers rely on their knowledge and skill. They engage in ongoing decision-making regarding what to teach, how to teach, and when to teach, balanced with careful observations of the child. They regularly reflect upon their teaching and the effectiveness of their decision-making by reviewing and revising the goals set for each child. They also seek the support of their colleagues and teacher leaders in examining their teaching and in exploring theory that informs their practice.

We have found the examination of teaching is aided by a framework within which to depict the ways teachers support students and to explore the timing of the support provided. Specifically, Wood's (2003) theory of contingent teaching provides a useful way to examine these issues relative to teaching writing in Reading Recovery lessons.

Wood's Theory of Contingent Teaching

Wood's (2003) theory of contingent teaching describes aspects of the tutor-student relationship that are useful when examining teaching responses in Reading Recovery lessons. In this model, the theory of scaffolded instruction (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) has been expanded in order to "articulate much more carefully and to describe the dimensions of contingent tutoring" (Wood, 2003, p. 14). The tutorial relationship is defined as "what's going on as one person helps another to solve a problem that, left alone, they can't solve on their own" (p. 9). In order to be contingent, one has to work collaboratively with a learner, making

teaching moves based on the learner's actions. Wood (2003) has defined three dimensions of tutoring: *domain contingency* (what to focus on next), *instructional contingency* (how to support activity), and *temporal contingency* (if and when to intervene).

In order to examine the Reading Recovery teachers' scaffolding and decision-making during their writing lessons, Wood's theory of tutoring was applied to our recorded observations of teaching. By examining the three dimensions of tutoring in the lessons of the 10 teachers, clear depictions of the teaching acts were possible.

First Dimension of Tutoring: What to Teach

In his model of contingent tutoring, Wood (2003) refers to the first dimension of tutoring as domain contingency and states that it "concerns the issue of what to focus on next in the time course of teaching" (p. 14–15). Clay suggests the *what* of word writing strategy instruction in saying

"... the teacher insists upon the learner hearing and recording the sounds in some words in the message, helps the learner to use what he or she knows to get to new words, and expects high frequency words to be put down quickly. The teacher writes into the story what is beyond the competency of the child at this point in the lesson series." (Clay, 2002, p. 229)

This means teachers who effectively foster change in children's writing select their teaching points carefully and do not confuse the learner with a vast array of new ways of considering words. However, children must build

competencies on a daily basis, throughout the course of their series of lessons. In early lessons, many parts of the word-solving process need to be learned. In later lessons, more complex words are attempted and spelling patterns might be explored. As the difficulty of the task increases, teachers may need to provide more support until learners are "steady on their feet" with the challenge. Teachers must also confirm the individual learner's needs on the basis of observed strengths and emerging competencies. Therefore, the focus of each instructional session is tailored to the individual child.

Clay (1993) offers further discussion of the different ways young learners solve words in writing in *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training* (Clay, 1993): "Sometimes you can analyze new words you want to write. Sometimes you have to know how to spell a particular word. Sometimes you have to 'make it like another word you know' which means get it by analogy with a common spelling pattern used in English" (p. 35). In summary, in terms of word writing strategies the *what* includes establishing both a basic writing vocabulary and strategies for recording unknown words.

Single Word-Solving Methods. For this discussion, the methods of solving and recording words that include using or adding a word to the child's fluent writing vocabulary, solving a word by linking the new word to another known word, and solving the word through a sound to letter analysis are referred to as single word-solving methods. These are reviewed below.

Children may begin their series of lessons in Reading Recovery with

some knowledge of how some words are written. The bank of words they know how to write fluently and without attention increases in size and complexity over time as teachers help them to learn *how to learn* new words. These high utility words are written frequently and fluently in many stories.

The analysis of words through the procedure of hearing and recording sounds in words, with or without the support of Elkonin boxes (Clay, 1993, p. 32), is another method of analyzing and recording words. Children gain control of analyzing the phonemes of words and establishing reliable and useful ways of recording them. They are able to learn about solving more and more complex words in this way with varying degrees of support from the teacher. The teacher's job is to decide which words in the child's story will provide the most powerful opportunities for this method of word solving to be strengthened.

As children become secure in the use of the words they know, they are able to become flexible with that knowledge. They are able to manipulate known words generatively in order to write other words; this means "making it like another word I know." This powerful way of thinking is supported through work in linking sound sequence to letter sequence activities of the lesson, and it is also fostered during reading. It moves from a teacher-guided process on basic examples to an independently applied process on examples that are more and more complex.

Examples of supporting students in using analogy, a single method of word solving, follow. The child uses an analogy when he is either

prompted by the teacher or reminds himself that a word sounds or looks like another word he knows. Either the teacher or the student may initiate the process, but it is a joint effort to solve the word. (In all examples, lowercase letters represent sounds and uppercase letters represent letter names.)

Example 1:

The child's story was: "They have the same seat and the same smoke stack." The word to be solved in this example is *smoke*. The child used the known onset *sm* from the known word *small* and then quickly considered the end of the word sounding like and looking like another word he knew.

- Matt: the same *smoke* ...
 Teacher: hmmm
 Matt: It starts like *small*.
 Teacher: okay
 Matt: (writes S-M) ... oke, Coke!
 Teacher: (laughing) Well?
 Matt: (writing) *oke* ... *smoke*!

Example 2:

The story to be written was: "I think that the tongue is sticking out because he is looking at a kangaroo." The word being solved was *think*. The known onset is *th* and the child was supported to consider how the rhyme is similar to another word she had written a few days before.

- Sophie: *think*
 Teacher: You know how to write *thing*. You wrote that word yesterday.
 Sophie: The thing inside is pretty.
 Teacher: *thing* ... Think about how it begins.
 Sophie: T-H?
 Teacher: Good work, write that down.

Sophie: T-H-

Teacher: In one of your other stories you wrote about your new pink dress. (teacher flips back in the writing book to the story written several days previously)

Sophie: There it is.

Teacher: Take a good look ... *think* and *pink* will end the same way.

Sophie: I-N-K?

Teacher: Yes, you write it.

A Combination of Solving

Approaches. The teachers observed in this project prompted and promoted knowing how to solve words through the three primary approaches detailed above, and the most common strategy applied was hearing and recording sounds in words. In addition, however, the teachers also were observed combining these ways of solving individual words. We refer to the application of multiple approaches to writing a given word as a combination of solving approaches. The following examples illustrate these more complex methods of co-construction.

Example 3:

In this example, one part of the word was solved by alerting the child to a known part of the word, and another part of the word was solved by having the child hear and record the sounds.

The child's story was: "My uncle is going to Calgary and I said 'Bye'." The word in the conversation sample is *going*. The child knew the word *go* but needed to hear and record the inflectional ending.

Teacher: *Going* ... *going* ... you know something about that.

Beth: Go ... (writes *go*)

Teacher: Say it again.
 Beth: *going*
 Teacher: What did you hear at the end?
 Beth: *go ... iinnnggg ... ing*
 Teacher: How would you write it?
 Beth: I-N-G
 Teacher: Where would you put it?
 Beth: At the end, right on the end ... *go ... ing!*

Example 4:

The story is: "I have a car that can flip in the air when it goes fast." The target word to be solved was *that*. Here the child was asked to consider how the onset is like another word he knew and then to use the known word *at* to complete the puzzle.

Teacher: *That ...* What do you know?
 Trevor: I don't know.
 Teacher: You know *the ... say the* and then say *that*
 Trevor: *the ... that*
 Teacher: They start the same.
 Trevor: T-H
 Teacher: What do you hear at the end of the word?
 Trevor: *th ... at ... at!* (writes *a* and *t*)

Example 5:

The story to be written is: "I had a nightmare and I donged my head." The word being solved is *head*. Here the child is asked to consider how the word he is solving started and ended like another word he knew. He was then directed to listen for and record the sound in the middle.

Marco: ... and then I donged my head ... *head*
 Teacher: You just wrote another word like that.
 Marco: I did? I had a nightmare and then I donged my head.

Teacher: Read it again and listen for another word that starts and ends like *head*

Marco: I had a ... *had, had*.
 Teacher: (drawing one box for each of three sounds) What do you hear in the middle?

Marco: *h...ee-e-e...d*. I hear *h* and *d*. (writes in *h* and *d*)

Teacher: And in the middle?
 Marco: *h...e-e-e...d... E*
 Teacher: How would you write it?
 Marco: Like this? (child writes *e*)
 Teacher: That's right and there's also an *a*. (She writes it in.)

Example 6:

The story that had been composed is: "The Bear family went fishing. 'I will catch Nemo,' said Mother Bear." The word being solved is *family*. The first part of the word was analyzed phoneme by phoneme, but two parts of the word were like the other words the child knew.

Natalie: *family ...* (going to the working page in the writing book and looking up at the teacher).
 Teacher: Go ahead. You try it.
 Natalie: *fam...F-A-M, fam, famil ...il...il...it, it...il... I-L ...ileeee*. Huh?
 Teacher: You know another word that ends that way.
 Natalie: *parteeeee...Y!*

Example 7:

The story being written is: "I was sick and Miss Smith missed me." The target word is *missed*. There was some confusion on the part of the child about the dual meanings of the word *miss*. The child, Beth, was reminded that she knew how to write part of the word and then after listening for

the final sound, was reminded that it was like the final sound in another word she knew.

Beth: *missed*
 Teacher: OK, you know how to write *miss*.
 Beth: *Miss?*
 Teacher: Yes, stop. You know how to write *miss*. You know how to write it, so we need *missed*. (child writes *mis*)
 Beth: I have to put another S?
 Teacher: Ummhmm, now you know how to write *miss* and we need *missed*.
 Beth: T?
 Teacher: Well, there are two letters that we can add to the end of a word that sometimes sound like a *t* but they look different. Like if we wanted to write the word *looked* what would we put at the end? *Look...looked*.
 Beth: E-D?
 Teacher: So you have *miss ...* but you need *missed*. It's the same. What can we put on the end to make it say *missed*?
 Beth: E-D

In all of these examples, the teachers clearly knew what words these children were able to write independently, and they were cognizant of the ways in which the children would be able to link their knowledge with new learning. Thorough knowledge of the learners' competencies has led the teachers to be able to prompt the children appropriately. The links that were made worked for these particular children at a given point in time. In all cases, the records of the children's writing vocabulary were key

sources of information as moment-by-moment decisions were made.

Second Dimension of Tutoring: How to Teach

Instructional contingency refers to “how a tutor adjusts the amount of help offered, not only on the basis of the child’s unaided task performance, but also on the basis of how the child responded to the tutor’s previous attempts to help” (Wood, 2003, p. 14). Five levels of support have been laid out by Wood, with Level One offering the least amount of support from the teacher and Level Five offering the greatest amount of support a teacher could provide. They are labeled as follows:

- Level One
General verbal intervention
- Level Two
Specific verbal intervention
- Level Three
Specific verbal intervention plus non-verbal indicators
- Level Four
Preparation for the next action
- Level Five
Demonstrates action

(p. 12)

Level One support is called *general verbal intervention* and is characterized as general praise or confirmation for the students. This may sound like, “good boy” or “what’s wrong?” or simply “hmmmm.” An example follows.

Beth: (re-reading her story) I made a book with a pig in ... I-N!

Teacher: Good for you! *

*Level One support

Level Two support, *specific verbal intervention*, is characterized by comments directed to the actual text by repeating, prompting, or drawing attention to a word or word part orally. The teacher may suggest “Did you say it slowly?” or “It starts like another word you know,” or “Give it a try up at the top.” An example of specific intervention from the observed teachers is

Beth: (trying to write *silly*)
sill *y*

Teacher: Oh, it ends like another word you know.*

Beth: I know! It’s like happy. E?

Teacher: It sounds like *e*, but it looks like ...

Beth: Y!

*Level Two support

Wood’s Level Three support is *specific verbal intervention plus non-verbal indicators*. The teacher’s nonverbal supports may include covering an error with white tape or drawing one box for every sound in a word. Simultaneous verbal supports may include statements suggesting that the child “Say it slowly,” “Think about how you start to write the word,” or “Listen carefully to ‘h-a-mmmmm-er’” (emphasizing the middle phoneme for the child). It is basically the same as Level Two support with an added physical cue or verbal emphasis. An example follows.

Trevor: (trying to write *jump*) I like to ... jump.

Teacher: OK, let’s try that word up here.

Trevor: *j ... j...j*

Teacher: Can you say that word slowly? (as she draws four boxes on the work page of the child’s writing book)*

Trevor: *j...uuuuuuuu...mmmm-mmmm...p*

Teacher: Wow, good job! Now say it slowly and push the counters into these boxes.

*Level Three support

Level Four support is labeled *preparation for next action*. In this case, according to Wood, the teacher reminds the child of the next word to write or invites the child to choose between two possibilities. “Here you are essentially offering the learner two alternatives to choose from, either an alternative for attention or action, or a choice between acting or of not acting at this point” (Wood, 2003, p. 13). In the example that follows, Carrie is working out the word *popped*.

Carrie: I know *pop*, but I need to put the ending on.

Teacher: What do you think?

Carrie: *popp . . . ed*. I hear *t*, it says *t*.

Teacher: Do you think it’s T like *hot* or E-D like *looked*?*

Carrie: E-D.

*Level Four support

In the most supportive teaching move the tutor is working at Level Five, *demonstrates action*. Here, the teacher will write a letter or word for the child, will tell the child the answer, will tell him exactly how to achieve the right answer, or may demonstrate or model an action. An example of this is demonstrated in a teaching sample where the child, Matt, is writing the word *case*.

Matt: *case*

Teacher: Say it slowly; what can you hear?

Matt: K... or C?

Teacher: It’s C.*

*Level Five support

By observing and analyzing the conversations and levels of prompting that the teachers offered their children, we found these teachers most frequently offered Level One and Level Two support. They praised children for their efforts and allowed opportunities for their learners to solve words as frequently and as independently as possible. The teachers also recognized when the children needed more direct prompting and support, when they needed a word written for them, and when it was powerful to explain something new.

Through regular reflection about the children, aided by surveying the lesson records, the children's writing books, and the records of the children's writing vocabulary, teachers were able to consider how much independence to expect, what aspects of word writing require moderate support, and what the challenges are that continue to require strong support. In summary, by referencing Wood's model of contingent teaching, the examples of teachers' decisions and prompts can be related to both domain contingency (what to teach) and instructional contingency (how to support the learner).

Third Dimension of Tutoring: When to Teach

"Tutors must determine 'how much time should I leave before I decide to intervene?'" (Wood, 2003, p. 16). Wait time has been a well-researched concept in education (McNaughton & Glynn, 1981; Rogoff, 1990; Rowe, 1986). It is an essential part of the relationship between a teacher and a student to allow enough time for the student to ponder a response effectively, yet not delay before the purpose of the reflection is lost or the student becomes frustrated. Rowe

(1997) clearly states that when teachers wait for 3 seconds or more to respond to students, especially after a student response, "there are pronounced changes in student use of language and logic as well as in student and teacher attitudes and expectations" (p. 60). By holding back while a student considers a response, the teacher is sending the message that she believes the child can solve the word and she expects the child to try.

Clay states that "... Acceleration is achieved as the child takes over the

support. Waiting for the student to make the first move to solve the word will provide the student with the opportunity to select a method of solving and will communicate to the student that he or she is in control of the writing process. The teacher adjusts prompts accordingly; and, as Cazden (1992) suggests, it is the teacher's conversation with the child that influences the learner's actions and independent solving.

The observations of our 10 Reading Recovery teachers gave some indication of how teachers use wait time

Teachers promote independent problem solving through providing wait time and carefully adjusting their support. Waiting for the student to make the first move to solve the word will provide the student with the opportunity to select a method of solving and will communicate to the student that he or she is in control of the writing process.

learning process and works independently, discovering new things for himself inside and outside the lessons ... the teacher must watch for and use this personal searching on the part of the child" (1993, p. 9). For teachers to provide these opportunities during the writing portion of the Reading Recovery lesson, they must select those words to solve that are within the children's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962) rather than those words the students are already adept in writing or those that are so unique or difficult that the teacher will need to write them into the child's story.

So, teachers promote independent problem solving through providing wait time and carefully adjusting their

effectively. The amount of time the teachers waited was determined by timing the pause between the point when a word or word part was identified and the point when the teacher made a verbal comment or made some nonverbal move to help, such as drawing one box for each sound or letter on the working page of the child's writing book. The teachers' wait times varied within lessons for all learners, meaning the teachers made observable decisions about their wait time. Two interesting patterns emerged.

First, we saw instances of all teachers giving immediate attention to supporting the child's word writing. That is, the teachers waited 2 seconds or less and then stepped in to help.

This happened throughout the course of each child's series of lessons and seemed related to the difficulty the word posed for the learner. The teachers recognized they needed to intervene immediately to support the young writers in order to have them achieve successful outcomes with some words.

In the following example, Beth is recording "I have a baseball game in three days." She is about to begin to work on the word *baseball* by using sound analysis. Because the teacher is aware of the child's *b/d* confusion, she intervenes immediately.

Beth: *b-aaaaa-sssss-b-aaaaa-lllll*.
B.

Teacher: (immediately interjects)
Now think about the *b*.
Down, up, and around.
The straight part first.

Second, and more significantly, the number of occurrences per story that the teacher waited 3 seconds or more before offering assistance, differed among children who made rapid progress and children who made slower progress. In each of these cases, the teachers of children who made more rapid progress tended to wait 3 seconds or more for the children to take action to solve words independently. We surmise that the children who made rapid progress had more opportunities to make moves unassisted and to find some way to write a word that they did not know. The greater the number of opportunities to solve words in writing seems to echo Stanovich's (1986) concept of the Matthew Effect in reading. The children who made the best progress had more opportunities to work independently on solving a wide variety of words.

In the following story, "He was not hungry. He ate the car and the bike," Matt is going to write the word *bike* and the teacher has his Writing Vocabulary chart on the table before her. She has noted that 3 weeks earlier he added *like* to his bank of known words.

Matt: Oh, that monster? He ate the car and the. . . bike. (looks at the teacher who says nothing and just looks at his writing page)

Matt: bike? Oh, *bike*. (writes B-I-K, and then hesitates; studies his attempt for a moment and then cautiously adds an *e*)

Teacher: Were you right? (waits)

Matt: Yup!

Teachers need to monitor the amount of time they wait through moment-by-moment reflection. Observation by a colleague or use of an audiotape would be useful tools for reflection on an individual's sense of timing, but it is a dimension that requires ongoing, deliberate attention.

Coordinating These Three Dimensions

Somewhere between the art and the science of teaching, teachers are able to make adjustments to their pedagogic skills. Through reflection on and forethought about the writing portion of each child's daily Reading Recovery lesson, teachers can monitor their role in supporting children's development of strategies for writing words. This process should also include the teacher's careful review of lesson records, records of writing vocabulary, and children's specific stories. When teachers are able to contemplate what word-solving

strategies they wish to foster, to consider how much support to provide for students each and every day, and to monitor their own eagerness to help, many powerful teaching moves occur.

Considering carefully what the different dimensions of instruction mean for the individuals they teach is critical for Reading Recovery teachers. The evidence provided by our observations of Reading Recovery teachers suggests that Wood's theory of the three dimensions of contingent tutoring is a highly useful method of analysis. Using Wood's model, three important features emerged:

1. The domain contingency (what to teach) in relation to developing alternative ways to write words includes both single and multiple word-solving methods.
2. The instructional contingency (how to adjust the amount of support offered) involves the judicious use of highly effective scaffolding that allows the learner to apply word writing strategies with as much independence as possible.
3. The temporal contingency (if and when to intervene) involves the effective use of wait time in order to promote independent action and problem solving.

A final note of caution comes from Wood (2003). "Tutors will insist on repeating what they've already said, often adding more detail, thus increasingly obscuring the message from the learner's point of view . . . keep to the point and be succinct. . . [the child] must always

succeed” (p.14). Through careful self-discipline, reflection, and appropriate anticipation, teachers will ensure they do not create additional and unnecessary confusion for the child with one-sided conversations.

The tutoring will be unique for every child, but teachers must consider the importance of their actions in relation to the actions of the children with whom they work:

“Every interaction in the daily writing segment is a teaching move—not a memory task, nor a practice attempt, nor an analysis of sounds, but carefully determined and astutely delivered teaching with a target that involves learning how to do something, do it better, do it faster, link it up to something, and prepare it for future independent use.” (Clay, 2001, p. 31–32)

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