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A Simple Model of the Reading Process

> *If fish were to become scientists, the last thing they might discover would be water.*
>
> S. Jay Samuels

In this book, we offer our understandings of guided reading instruction and work to bring clarity to some big ideas surrounding it. Our arrival at the understandings central to this book has been comparable to fish discoveries of water. We were metaphorically splashing around in this work of guiding readers on a daily basis, but our shifts in understanding came with the discovery that the reading process, rather than text levels, is the critical part of guided reading. This idea seems obvious now. As we will explore in this book, however, many common practices in guided reading emphasize reading level over reading process.

Honoring the Complexities of Reading

Reading is a fantastically complicated process, the mechanisms of which are largely invisible to an observer (Clay, 1991, 1993, 2005a). In fact, reading is so complex that educational researchers still don't absolutely understand how it works. There are whole books dedicated to explaining the different models developed by reading researchers to describe how students learn to read (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). There exist detailed models of the reading process that look at comprehension (Anderson, 2004; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004; Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich, & Anderson, 2004), others that focus on word recognition (Adams, 1990, 2004), others that examine student attitude (Mathewson, 2004), others that consider student interaction with text (Rosenblatt, 2004), and so on.

Because *Preventing Misguided Reading* focuses on practicality more than theory, we present the reading process differently, attempting to label

enough of the elements we think critical without introducing a dimension of vocabulary that gets in our way. We offer a comparatively simple illustration of the reading process, recognizing its profound limitations for infinitely scrutinizing the minute details of students' reading and its tremendous utility for actually engaging in conversations about how students read. The technicality of our vocabulary inversely relates to the number of people with whom we can talk. This does not speak to the wit or wisdom of educators, but rather to the enormity of learning to read and the many subtleties that hold the potential for fine analysis and complicated study.

Simplicity allows us to broadly instruct, document, and discuss the work of readers, whereas complexity allows us to closely align our instruction to the needs of our students. If we move too far into the complexities, we run the risk of getting lost in detail, confused by semantics, or distracted by individual cases; if we step too far away from the complexity, we might allow oversimplification to push us to consider students narrowly or to generalize away from truth.

Like general practitioners and specialists, both of whom are experts in medicine, these tensions between practicality and theory, generality and specifics, are resolved "situationally." In *this* situation, we aim to bring in just enough theory to support consideration of practice.

Engaging a Vocabulary Around the Reading Process

To effectively teach guided reading, it helps to understand the reading process as it represents the ways a reader accesses and integrates information from multiple cues for the purpose of gaining understanding. This tenet is the most important idea in this book! Teaching guided reading is about teaching toward a particular student's reading process. Guided reading is not about teaching "little books." It is not about prompting for strategies or about leveling texts or students. It is first and foremost about developing in students reading processes that are efficient, or what Clay (1993) refers to as "a smoothly operating reading system" (p. 17).

Readers will access various sources of information in the process of making sense of a text. Three sources of information originally

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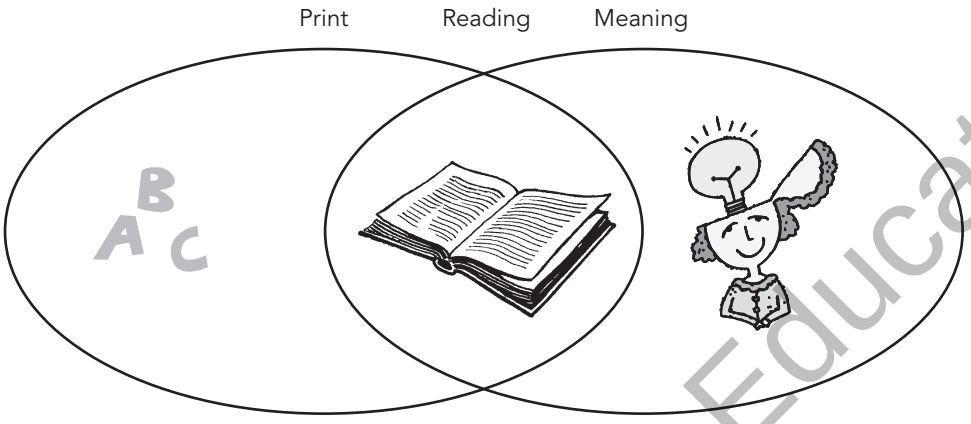
described by Clay (1979, 1991), and which educators commonly consider, are meaning (i.e., the context, including the pictures), visual (i.e., the print), and structure (i.e., the language or syntax). These three sources of information support each other, working in concert to form an interactive reading process. The redundancy of information across these cues allows readers to check themselves when they are reading by comparing what different sources of information are telling them. So, a student who reads proficiently might read a word by accessing the visual information (looking at the print) and automatically check that print information against the meaning that is already in place.

For the sake of simplicity and clarity, we chose to support the explorations in this text with a general illustration of reading that is informed by the reading process as described by Clay, but focuses our language even more. Basically, when one thinks of the pragmatics of reading instruction, there are two "biggies": Students have to read the words *and* understand them.

To represent these two dimensions, we refer to the print (e.g., letters, sounds, letter patterns, punctuation) and the meaning (e.g., context, language structure, pictures, vocabulary). You'll note that throughout the book, we refer to print and meaning in a general sense and more specifically as defined here. For example, in references like "a student who relies too heavily on print," the term *print* actually includes all visual aspects of the reading process. However, "the student studied *the* print" refers specifically to the print on the page. Similarly, when we say "the reader depends heavily on meaning when reading," we are referring to all the elements that offer semantic or syntactic support to the reader, such as the pictures, pattern in the text, vocabulary, and so forth. If, on the other hand, we say "the teacher read *the* story," we are simply talking about the book or story the teacher is reading and not specifically referencing the reading process. Our use of the article *the* should help you distinguish between our two uses of these terms. According to our representation, reading is the back-and-forth work of considering the print information as it supports story, and vice versa, as represented in Figure 1. This diagram illustrates the way a reader engages in integrated processing of textual cues toward the end of gathering the meaning of the text.

A general way to describe the way a reader integrates these two sources of information is to refer to him or her as "balanced." The term

Figure 1. The Relationship Between Print and Meaning



balance in the field of literacy has come under scrutiny and scholars have, with good reason, criticized it. It can represent an oversimplification of the reading process and implies that there is some moment of stasis in the act of reading. Actually, the process of reading involves constant activity and mental motion. Nevertheless, as a place to start, it is worth considering the term *balance* as a general descriptor of how efficient readers access information. By balance, we mean, are students equally proficient in drawing from print and meaning and, even more important, are they able to efficiently integrate this information—weighing one against the other—in ways that demonstrate a smooth reading process and support their understanding of the text?

So, in theory, a student who is engaging a balanced reading process will have comparable levels of skill in decoding words (i.e., print) and in accessing background knowledge and language structure (i.e., meaning) of the text and will use these two sources to check and confirm. This reading process is represented by Figure 1. When a student has a reading process such as this, he or she simply sounds like a proficient reader, making the amazingly complex text of reading appear easy.

Although a student may demonstrate a balanced reading process at a particular level of text difficulty, increasing the difficulty level of the text will betray strengths and weaknesses. As Clay (1979) suggests, "Everybody's reading behaviour can be broken down under difficulties" (p. 17).

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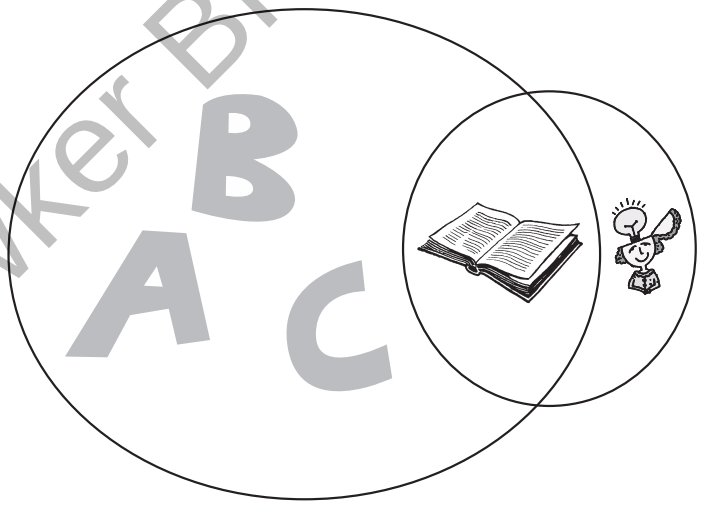
Consider this analogy: In the day-to-day routines of life, we may feel that we can use either arm indiscriminately for basic tasks. If, however, we engage in a demanding physical task, such as push-ups, we are likely to find that one arm is actually stronger than the other. Such is the case with a reader's use of print and meaning. In more difficult text (i.e., frustration level), students are likely to rely on the information sources with which they are more adept. As the text increases in difficulty, this tendency to favor one system over another will cause a student to sound, or look, less and less like a proficient reader. Therefore, a student who does not have a balanced reading process is likely to have stronger skills in one (i.e., print or meaning) area or another, generally relying more heavily on one source of information and neglecting the other. For example, a student who decodes but does not comprehend well is illustrated by Figure 2.

This hypothetical student, who demonstrates a broad skill set in print and a narrow skill set in meaning, may engage a reading process that focuses on sounding out words or deliberating over some aspect of print. Students with this pattern in their reading may spend significant time laboring over each individual sound in the word *cat* when there is a prominent picture of a cat above the word.

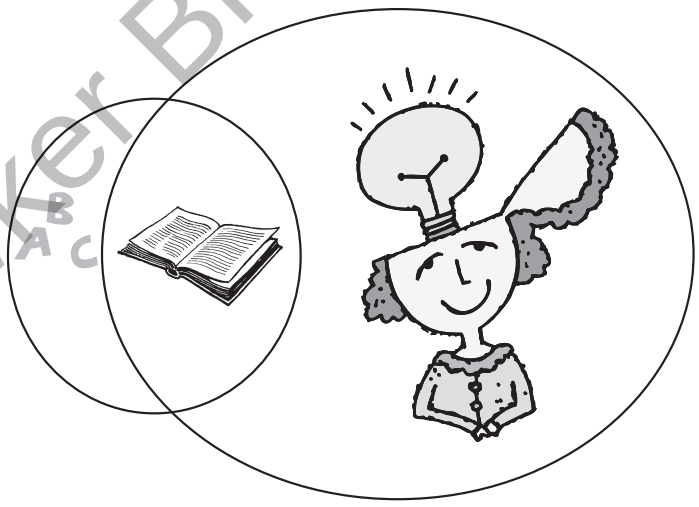
Figure 2. The Reading Process for a Print-Dependent Reader



On the other hand, some students have the reverse behaviors, displaying skill and difficulty in the opposite information systems. For example, students who have extensive vocabularies, sound syntactical understandings, and a deep sense of story structure have a solid foundation in meaning. These students may lack, however, visual strategies or strength with print, as Figure 3 represents. These students engage a reading process that focuses on meaning as support for figuring out the words. They only access print in limited ways. Such readers often look at the first few letters of a word and guess without checking, or they may insert, omit, or substitute words that do not alter the text along meaning dimensions. Their errors often make sense and sound right, even if just to the reader.

One more model of reading is that of students who have skill in maximizing both print and meaning in isolation, but are not proficient at integrating the two sources of information. These students may access one source without checking it against the other. In terms of meaning, they may listen to books read aloud and answer questions well, and they may have extensive vocabularies. In terms of print, they generally understand how the visual system works and have some automaticity

Figure 3. The Reading Process for a Meaning-Dependent Reader



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with the code. For example, they may navigate a list of high-frequency words without hesitation. Confirming and cross-checking print and meaning against each other in connected text, however, poses a challenge, so they are unlikely to self-correct their errors. These readers demonstrate in isolation skills they don't integrate in context.

In our experience, this pattern of reading behavior is pervasive. When students spend increasing amounts of time in text that is too difficult for them, they quit trying to engage a balanced reading process. For example, these students may inaccurately read in context the same high-frequency words they accurately read in isolation. Their errors are not because they do not know the words or because they do not understand the story. Their errors rise from not integrating the two. A reading process such as theirs is graphically represented in Figure 4.

Of course, we do encounter students who have limited skill sets both with print and meaning, as we illustrate in Figure 5. These students, in particular, drive us to distribute and integrate our instruction in print and meaning in thoughtful ways.

Generally, these five Venn diagrams represent the reading processes of most readers. Students' processes will vary across texts, so a student may demonstrate a balanced reading process in one text and print dependence

Figure 4. The Reading Process for a Student With Skill in Print and Meaning but Difficulty With Integrated Processing